DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 102 556 CS 201 840

TITLE	Teaching Creative Writing.
INSTITUTION	Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE	74
NOTE	140p.
EDRS PRICE	MF-$0.76 HC-$6.97 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS	College Programs; *Composition (Literary); *Creative Writing; Fiction; Nonfiction; Poetry; Prose; *Teaching Techniques

ABSTRACT

This book contains an edited transcription of the proceedings of the Conference on Teaching Creative Writing held at the Library of Congress in January 1973. Directors of the four pioneer writing programs in the United States presented papers and led the panel discussions. Panel members were distinguished graduates of or participants in these writing programs. The topics and directors of the four panels are "A Perspective of Academic Programs in Creative Writing" by Elliott Coleman, "The Writing of Poetry" by Paul Engle, "The Writing of Fiction" by Wallace Stegner, and "Nonfiction Prose" by John Ciardi. A list of publications on literature, based on lectures presented at the Library of Congress, is included. (JM)

ED102556

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

Teaching Creative Writing

Published for the Library of Congress
by the Gertrude Clarke Whittall
Poetry and Literature Fund

Washington 1974

CS201840

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Conference on Teaching Creative Writing, Library
of Congress, 1973.
Teaching creative writing.

Supt. of Docs. no.: LC1.2: C86.
Includes bibliographical references.
1. Authorship—Congresses. I. United States.
Library of Congress. Gertrude Clarke Whittall Poetry
and Literature Fund. II. Title.
PN133.U5C6 1973 808′.042 74-3467
ISBN 0-8444-0121-8

For sale by the Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office
Washington, D.C. 20402 - Price $1.40
Stock Number 3000-00072

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

The Gertrude Clarke Whittall Poetry and Literature Fund

The Gertrude Clarke Whittall Poetry and Literature Fund was established in the Library of Congress in December 1950, through the generosity of Mrs. Gertrude Clarke Whittall, to create a center in this country for the development and encouragement of poetry, drama, and literature. Mrs. Whittall's earlier benefactions include the presentation to the Library of a number of important literary manuscripts, a gift of five magnificent Stradivari instruments, the endowment of an annual series of concerts of chamber music, and the formation of a collection of music manuscripts that has no parallel in the Western Hemisphere.

The Poetry and Literature Fund makes it possible for the Library to offer poetry readings, lectures, and dramatic performances. These panel discussions are published by the Library to reach a wider audience and as a contribution to literary history and criticism.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Teaching Creative Writing

Teachers of creative writing from American colleges and universities gathered at the Library of Congress for a Conference on Teaching Creative Writing on January 29 and 30, 1973, chaired by the Library's Consultant in Poetry, Josephine Jacobsen, under the auspices of the Gertrude Clarke Whittall Poetry and Literature Fund.

Leading the separate panels were directors of the four pioneer writing programs in the United States: Elliott Coleman, founding director of the Writing Seminars at The Johns Hopkins University; Paul Engle, founder of the Writers' Workshop and now director of the International Writing Programs of the School of Letters of the University of Iowa; Wallace Stegner, founding director of the Creative Writing Center at Leland Stanford University; and John Ciardi, longtime director of the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference. Panel members were distinguished graduates of or participants in these programs, who discussed the disciplines of poetry, fiction, and nonfiction prose, after a formal paper by each panel chairman. Professor Coleman was chairman of the opening panel, "A Perspective of Academic Programs in Creative Writing"; Professor Engle chaired the panel on "The Writing of Poetry"; Professor Stegner, the panel on "The Writing of Fiction"; and Professor Ciardi, the panel on "Nonfiction Prose." After discussion of the papers, some dialog with the audience was invited. This transcription of the proceedings has been edited for the wider audience which it merits.

v

Contents

1 *Welcoming Remarks*
3 *A Perspective of Academic Programs in Creative Writing*
26 *The Writing of Poetry*
65 *The Writing of Fiction*
94 *The Writing of Nonfiction Prose*

Welcome

Librarian of Congress

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. I am Quincy Mumford, Librarian of Congress, and it's a special, personal pleasure to welcome this distinguished gathering to the Library of Congress and to open this Conference on the Teaching of Creative Writing. The conference about to begin is part of the Library's ongoing effort through its Gertrude Clarke Whittall Poetry and Literature Fund to weave a vigorous awareness of contemporary literature into the fabric of American life. In addition to our free public readings and talks by noted writers, we foster from time to time a major convocation of illustrious practitioners of some aspect of modern literature, to share their ideas, experiences, and the fruits of their own creativity. The present conference follows in the tradition of our National Poetry Festival of 1962, the symposium on small magazine publishing of 1965, and the International Poetry Festival of 1970. Before turning the conference over to the chairman of the first panel, the distinguished Elliott Coleman of The Johns Hopkins University, just let me express the hope that the stimulus of the symposia and the readings of the next two days will be enriching to each of you, and lasting. And now it's my pleasure to turn the meeting over to Professor Coleman.

A Perspective of Academic Programs in Creative Writing

Elliott Coleman, chairman; John Ciardi, Paul Engle,
George Garrett, Theodore Morrison, Wallace Stegner

Elliott Coleman:

Dr. Mumford, ladies and gentlemen.

It is likely that many of us can be in instant agreement with something Wallace Stegner said in his introduction to *Twenty Years of Stanford Short Stories,* published in 1966, and that we'd like to join him this morning in asking the same question he asked then. To quote Wallace Stegner:

> We have never pretended that we taught young writers much of anything—in fact, we have drawn back from the danger of being *too* influential—but it has been our faith that we helped create an environment in which they could learn and grow. It would be interesting to know whether or not we succeeded in providing such an environment, or whether they would have been better off keeping a diary in the Peace Corps, or working in a steel mill, or writing for a newspaper. Were these writers, I wonder, warmed and brightened by any promethean fire they found at Stanford, or did they merely strain their eyes trying to learn?[1]

These questions, and similar and related ones, are of course the reason for our being together for these two days of meetings, and it was the imagination, the wisdom, and the enterprise of Dr. Roy P. Basler that brought it all about. He has had the invaluable assistance of Mrs. Josephine Jacobsen, now Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress for her second year, and general chairman of this conference. Because of the great proliferation of academic writing programs over this country, Dr. Basler divined that this was the time publicly to ask these questions in the hope of getting some answers: a time to assess what good may have resulted, or what harm we've done.

John Ciardi has taken the pains to tell me how, with the aid of a bequest of something like 30,000 acres, the School of English and the

Bread Loaf Writers' Conference of Middlebury College opened in the summer of 1922, with Robert Frost as its patron saint. Theodore Morrison was its director from 1932 till 1955. John Ciardi was in charge from 1955 until last year, when Robert Pack took over. Bread Loaf has always thriven. It is still thriving.

The remarkable Program in Creative Writing at the University of Iowa began in 1930. Its Writers' Workshop opened in 1931. Under the astute direction of Paul Engle, celebrated writers were continually brought to Iowa. Paul Engle's program became the most extensive and the most famous university writing program in America. It still is. John Leggett is now director, and Paul Engle has founded a new program in international writing, of which we hope to hear more from him.

Wallace Stegner wrote me recently to confess he had some qualmish thoughts about what we might find ourselves saying here, but to quote him again:

> I walked into my first writing class at Stanford in 1945 and found myself facing a dozen students, GI and otherwise, of whom . . . five were more talented or more finished, or both, than anyone I had ever seen in a classroom. The first story submitted to me was Eugene Burdick's "Rest Camp on Maui." . . . It was published in *Harper's Magazine*, won second prize in the O. Henry volume for 1946, and started Bud Burdick on his brief, hot career. . . . But it started something else, too, in the people around him: an excitement, a challenge, a feeling that anything was possible. . . .[3]

At Johns Hopkins, the first seminar in imaginative writing opened the same year: 1945. In the back of the room there sat a young veteran from the Navy by the name of Russell Baker. Propinquity partly explains my presence here, but among those with advanced degrees representing Hopkins on this program are Louis Rubin, John Barth, and Anthony McNeill of Jamaica. Perhaps the theme at Hopkins has been Criticism as an Act of Love, in praise or blame, but always praise first: to try to find the genius of the writer and then encourage it.

George Garrett, formerly of Hollins College and now at the University of South Carolina, and every other person on this platform will speak of his work, and then there may be questions and statements from the many here who deserve equal time.

Are these academic communities of writers worthwhile? Should they be encouraged? Are there faults that need to be corrected? Perhaps, gentlemen, you might respond alphabetically, beginning with John Ciardi.

John Ciardi:

Thank you, Elliott. I'm going to quote Wallace Stegner, too; let's make that a fashion. The introduction of one of his books begins with, I think, a pertinent statement about our situation. "A writer," he said, "learns his craft through millions of particulars." Now what I do with that sentence from here on is not his responsibility. I'm suggesting that it is probably not important in what order he learns those particulars. I have it in my mind that anything we say directly will be wrong, but that indirection may lead us somewhere. At least, that's an excuse for not knowing what I'm going to say next, since it allows me to be as indirect as you please.

I do think, as I look back, that there was no writer of any consequence in history who was not at some time a member of a group. He might have been a loyal member of the group; or he might have left, as Shelley left Cambridge, saying all he got from college was a valuable disgust. If we can disgust one another towards something good, that's as good as exhorting one another towards something good. But every writer I can think of was at some time a member of a group, whether it was the Greek agora, or the Roman bath, or the French café, or the English university. And it occurs to me, therefore, that after that the man might leave and go live on a mountain, but he needed some period of social cross-fertilization, you know, because the arts are socially transmitted. Often, because the schools have started this tradition of attaching writers, and because being in a university can be sterilizing, some writers rebel. There's a history to the academic tradition; as I recall it, the first writers began to be attached to universities in the twenties. They were almost invariably people with bachelor's degrees. By the thirties, and up to World War II, they began to appear as young writers with master's degrees. Now most of them have full Union Card Ph.D.'s, and I'm not sure whether that's an entirely good program, because there is a tendency—I've experienced this. When I went to Rutgers, I didn't ask for academic rank, I asked for money, and in order to give me that money ("see, I'm a writer, I like money"), they found out they had to make me a full professor in order to justify the budget line, and then they expected me to act like a full professor, which is one reason I left—there is that force within the universities to make the attached writers conform to academic manner, and I'm not sure it's a good thing. Sometimes, writers rebel.

Some time back, I got into a little trouble, got nasty letters from various people, including one from Nelson Algren, who had been a good friend but decided to cancel it. Kurt Vonnegut, who is a good writer, wrote a stupid piece in the *New York Times* about writers' conferences. I checked back on it; he had gone to one and begun by getting drunk the first morning and sobering up three days after the conference was over; and then, having conducted his survey, he did a piece on writers' conferences. Well, I recognize, I think, what he was reacting to—who wants to go through this drill? And it's natural for a writer to hate that kind of formalization, but at one point, in what I thought was a miserable opening paragraph—I suggested that if he would stop by Bread Loaf we could certainly show him how to improve that first paragraph. I didn't say I was going to show him how to write a novel, I was talking about that paragraph. It said good writing or bad writing is something that only God lets us do. Well, you see, if you want to take that purity of position, let's cancel this meeting and go home. Let's say God can use some help. Obviously, you have to consult something that no institution can give you in order to find talent.

A writer, I think, should at least be word-sensitive, though that's not absolutely necessary. I can think of a number of rather successful novels, anyhow, by men who write clumsily, as you could imagine—who's the author of that *Catch-22,* Joe Heller, can write a novel—he can't write an English sentence. It's possible to overcome any inability, but basically, I think that writers are word-sensitive people. If they are word-sensitive, I think the relationship of the man running the writers' program is not that of teacher but of coach. If somebody shows up with the right body and the right motivation and the right coordination—let's say the boy is six foot two and can do a hundred yards in 10 seconds wearing a football uniform and has good hands and understands the play—almost any coach could make a good end out of that man. But if he comes with a fervent desire to play, but lacks the body and the coordination, what can you say? You know, take your complaints to your own genetic structure, you haven't got it. I think that's one of the honest things that might have to be said. I can think of at least one time when I said it in all honesty to someone who got so mad he grew better in anger and wrote better, having been angered by being told he hadn't had it. It turned out he did have some of it, he simply hadn't been showing it. But there is no way, it seems to me, that our society—let me put it this way: I've heard teachers over and over again in the public school system describe life as if you could draw a blueprint of where you wanted to get, and then achieve those goals, and that is called life—it ends with a marina in Florida in the sunset years. I'm not at all sure that that's the way it goes. Certainly, there is no program I would respect that can set out its goals. I think all that can happen is to start the discussion, to get the would-be writer to put something down on paper, and then, perhaps, to save him some time by putting your finger on something he would have put his finger on years later, or by angering him enough to sharpen him.

Paul Engle:

John Ciardi is not allowed to reply to my remarks, I hope, is he, Elliott? He's through?

Coleman:

I'm not sure

Engle:

I must be forgiven a piece of pedantry, but as an alumnus of the university, I must be forgiven, John: Shelley was not at Cambridge, he was at the older university in England. There is a hideous statue to Shelley in University College, Cambridge—Oxford—you see, you've confused me—and it's a feeble little boy statue, it's a strange piece of marble; he is not wearing clothes, but he isn't really nude, and it's in a room where he presumably lived, and it has a soft light which makes him look slightly decayed—which is natural, it was in the last century that he drowned. And, in looking at it, you have the strong feeling that that's not the poet who was really very hard-boiled, and who ran away with Mary Wollstonecraft, and who wrote the "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty." I mention all this only to say that University College, which made the statue, of course expelled Shelley. And we've come a long way since poets were expelled because of their opinions. I suppose we may enter that phase again; poets certainly get punished for their opinions in a good many countries of the world today.

A long time ago, in what now looks like the beginning of creative writing time, we began a course at the University of Iowa which had in it poets, fiction writers, playwrights, essayists—one man was writing his autobiography, he was 20—and out of this chaos, we developed a program. The extraordinary thing to me, having been first of all a student in it and having then gone away for five years and come back, was to discover that—the intervening years were spent largely in England and the continent, where creative writing was a term of contempt—was to discover that actually this was a part of the whole American idea, that any university can teach anybody anything. They have courses in embalming; given the mortality of writers, this is extremely valuable. Accounting, nursing, all, everything, we believed, was a suitable subject for the human mind, and you could instruct someone in it. So why not writing? And I shall never forget in the first workshop I taught, a young poet, who shall be nameless, but who gave me these poems of unbelievable quality, his first poems, and when I read one of them and discussed it, he began to shake, he began to sweat, and his hands went to his stomach, and I thought, "My God, the floor!" And he literally became physically ill, after submitting to what obviously for him was a martyrdom. Well, we've come a long way since then, students expect it now; now, they're much more hard boiled. I discussed a poem by a young man who was very aggressive about criticism. He always defended his poem. At the end he said nothing this time, and I looked at him, and he shook his head, and I said, "You won't even speak?" He had never failed to argue before, and he said, "No." I said, "Why not?" And he said, with that kind of contempt which the young writer has for an older writer—I mean, he obviously enjoys his sneer—he looked at me with contempt, and indeed pity, and he said "The *New Yorker* took it yesterday." [*Laughter and inaudible audience reaction*] Oh, God, I didn't realize he was in the room. However, there's a door out, and it's very complicated back there.

Now, you all know the story of the two poets who met on the street, and one said, "How are you, what are you doing?"—it's always a mistake, never ask a writer what he's doing—and 15 minutes later, he concluded his reply by saying, "That's enough about me, let's talk about you. How did you like my last book?"

This afternoon, I'm going to talk in more precise detail about the problem of the poet and the creative writer, but may I just say that perhaps, having been, like Ted Morrison, engaged in this reckless enterprise for a great many years, I would like to say that we've come an immense distance, and in a very short time. When I became a teacher of creative writing at the University of Iowa, the dean, who was a geologist and therefore an object of my admiration (because I began life as a geologist after I left the Methodist ministry—all those fossils did something to me), said, "All right, we will pay you the exact number of hours you teach in a classroom. If you want to write, that's your problem." And I say we seem to have come a long way since then.

So, this morning, I'm going to let others talk essentially about the American scene. I want to conclude my remarks by saying that indeed we have come a great distance in Iowa City, because, in conjunction with my wife, who is a writer in Chinese, we bring now only foreign writers, so at any given moment in Iowa City, people are writing poems, plays, novels, in Pushtu from Afghanistan, in Chinese, in Swahili, Portuguese, Russian, Romanian, all of the languages in which people make these rending commitments. Last summer, we traveled from Ljubljana in northern Yugoslavia over the mountains, and down toward the coast we came to a little town, a Slovenian town called Kobarid. And I said, "There's something familiar about this," and our guide said, "Look on the hill." And on the hill was the Italian cemetery from the First World War, and he said, "This was the valley where the Italian army made its push. There are 600,000 graves in this valley," and we drove up on top of the mountain then. His father—he was a Slovenian poet—had been an artillery officer in the Austrian army who had fired his artillery piece from that mountain. And far down, you could see the beginning of the plain where Hemingway had driven his ambulance, and where his knees had been smashed by Austrian artillery. And I turned to this man and said, "Do you think there's any chance that your father might have fired the shell which shot Ernest Hemingway?" And he said, with great feeling, "I hope so." And then he said, "We were always a literary family." And it is this, in a sense, conviction, which I began with in 1931, that there ought to be a place for writers in the United States, that they had a lot in common, and they could be of use to a university, as well as the university of use to them, and so, by the end of the summer, I had become even more convinced that there is a world of the imagination and it expresses itself in many languages. And, always, as we deal with these foreign people, even as we dealt with the Americans earlier, I am convinced that every time one more automobile is made, a hundred more poems ought to be written; that every time we become even more organized and the computer with our Social Security number adds even more incriminating facts to the file, poetry becomes more important; and every time a child is born or those last whooping cranes make it back to Canada one more time, the writer becomes more important. And, as all of us here believe, he can be taught a little bit, but most of all, the beauty and power and splendor of the imagination as the words in which we order food and speak to our friends and ask directions on the street can make a kind of form, and that's what we've been trying to do.

Coleman:
George Garrett.

George Garrett:
I'm glad you said that. I was getting worried about this alphabetical

thing, and checking it and rechecking; the alphabet is not very kind, and, especially having to follow a tough act like the duo of John Ciardi and Paul Engle. I knew that this was going to happen any way that they cut it. If we drew straws, I would be in tough shape on this program, wondering what I was doing up here, and so I've been searching for about three days for a mystical sign, or a theme, just something, a handle, and got kind of desperate last night, stayed up watching *Lawrence of Arabia*—only the first half, they took Aqaba—but I hadn't found that theme, and went to bed hoping I would dream it, and I didn't dream it, I just had terrible dreams which are coming true right now. And then I woke up—this was in Henry Taylor's house—woke up and looked on the wall, and somehow by pure mystic intuition he had a sampler on the wall that does this just fine. It was a famous remark of Julia Moore, that sweet singer of Michigan, when her first book was savagely attacked by various critics and she published her second book and, in the course of defending herself, said emphatically something that struck me as the proper theme: "The literary is a work very difficult to do." And she's right, so that, like John Ciardi's coach, I'm going to put that up in the locker room and think about it.

I also have come with a sense of confession, a badge of shame and failure, as a teacher of writing. A little story goes with it, something to do with our subject. This was a young lady—you know, sometimes in the course of a semester, writers develop blocks of one kind or another or simply can't do anything—and we were both reading and writing, which is what it's all about, and this young lady never could write anything. I was very sympathetic; I'd had a student at Virginia some years before who was a one-page man, and I finally, by the end of the semester, got it where he went on to page two, and that was a thrill. This young lady was one that I failed with completely, because she finally had written nothing. I said: "All right. If you can't do a story or a poem, we really ought to do something in a writing course. We've been reading some books, along with our writing—how about doing me just a little paper, your impressions of one of them?" She said, "Okay, I'll write a paper on *In Cold Blood*," which was new and which we'd been reading, and I said that sounded fine, and then she came back and couldn't write the paper. So finally we reached a compromise. I said, "Well, do whatever you do best," and waited to see whether it would be singing, dancing. . . . What happened was, I got it, wrapped in tissue paper and a little note, this necktie with a label on it, since lost, which said, "This is a Nancy Clutter original." It was worth it. She got an A in the course.

What we're dealing with here, from my point of view, and from my angle, is a largely post-World War II phenomenon. It is a fact now that writers are on the campus and that they are teaching writing and reading, among other things, and there are a couple of aspects of this I just wanted to talk about. I could talk about the different institutions because I've been in and out of a lot—different institutions and their programs, but basically they are workshop, seminar, and tutorial programs, and we do the best we can. At South Carolina I've played straight man to Jim Dickey and that does not include permission of wearing a big hat. I wore one over the first day, just like his, and he said, "Take it off."

So I thought I'd talk generally a little bit about some of the problems that we face now. With the expansion in the years immediately following World War II, the growth of the idea of teaching writing parallels and goes along with studies and courses in contemporary lit. As I recall, at Princeton, we got both at the same time, and they probably wouldn't want to admit it now, but there were riots—can you imagine that, there were riots to have something taught after Henry James, which was the cutoff date. Contemporary lit came in, and simultaneously with that as well, the parallel, the arrival of the writer as a figure on the campus. And it's just continued to grow, and that is the way it is now. But here are some problems. Most of our good students, with a few exceptions, are writing, in the academic environment, with the time that they have, and with the interests that they have, for our purposes, poems and stories. And they are writing good poems and good stories, a great many of them. But what becomes of these? This has so little relationship to the hard facts of the contemporary literary marketplace. The possibilities for books of poems, after what looked like a nice expansion a few years ago through the university presses and one thing and another, have begun to diminish, and we're in the awkward position of encouraging people to do what they do very well with very little possibility of their doing much with this.

A second problem that's developing is the danger of an approach in writing, that we will begin to have too many standards that are universally accepted, and we'll begin to have—and we may see some signs of this already—the standard workshop-created novel collection of stories or poems. It's a beginning, but there is this danger, and one aspect of it is that any approach of this kind is by nature conservative. Now, moving over to reading, because I think that the reading and writing are inseparable, it will be by nature conservative of the present literary establishment, will ask fewer questions, perhaps, than were asked in a time of more anarchy, and it may even follow along with certain other art forms and develop emphatically a star system, which I think is a very bad thing for American writing, particularly today, when we have so many people writing so well. It is also true that in the academic setup the writer on the staff and the young writers who are learning find themselves caught up in the same sort of publish-or-perish situation that their colleagues (sometimes enemies) the scholars and critics are caught up in. There seems to be a good deal more pressure on the young writer these days than just a few years ago to produce and to have something to show for this, and writing may not mature in that fashion. It may really be that the girl who did the Nancy Clutter original will outwrite everybody else that was in the class, all in due time. We might also ask ourselves the question, whom are we offering any service other than the young people who take the course, who may or may not become or be writers but who are learning something about reading and writing that's important?

There is the problem that a writing course is inevitably small, and that's good, except that everywhere I look now, university presidents are thinking that if the class is smaller than this auditorium, then that's a disaster. The old lecture system is coming, sneaking back in as a result of purely budgetary considerations, and the fact that university presidents recognize every once in a while—looking at accounting and bookkeeping—that the most expensive thing they've got in their university, besides all those buildings they're throwing up all the time, is faculty salaries, and they say, "Look at all that fat." And the next thing you know, you walk in and you've got a class of 500 kids and you're trying to teach something that you really would like to give a little bit of intimate rapport. Well, maybe we don't service the universities and colleges at the moment, in the sense that the universities and college presidents and administrations would like us to. We are helping, I think, some kids in their education, and they work for the one brief time in an artificial situation of a group. Writing is after all not finally a group enterprise, and that's one of our problems as teachers, too, to pass them beyond the need of and for a workshop, seminar, or constant criticism. We really don't have to worry about it, because, with that satisfactory sneer that's been mentioned earlier, they graduate beyond us all too soon. But we also should, I think, be of some service and value to the publishers. All of the writers—for the most part whether they take writing courses or not—from now on in this country are going to be coming out of the colleges as once upon a time, a full generation ago, they came out of high schools, but that change has taken place and we might as well live with it. The publishers now know that they are looking at colleges and they go around to the writing programs looking for talent, and yet in what way should we serve them? Shouldn't we react critically to some of the things that they are looking for, with a full sympathy for their financial problems, etc.? Don't we need to press them to publish some of the poems and stories in this outstanding period, really, of young writers; press them to publish these things rather than often second-rate first novels just because they are book-length? If we get in too close with the publishers, we will then be, as I suggested earlier, confirming a system that already exists. We need to be working with them, but at the same time, we need to be critical of them.

And I think we are also, and we are going to have to face this in the course of the conference, teaching teachers, not entirely, not exclusively, but I think we're teaching some good teachers, and teachers who can work at both ends of a kind of scale. I've found, in working with adult education and with people who would be classified as functional illiterates, that of course they are intelligent, able, but they have this one stumbling block, learning to read and write, and that the fastest way to touch upon the talents and gifts that they have, and to get them reading and writing well, is to make it a "creative" rather than essay-type thing. Some of our people at South Carolina, for example, are now working, I think, and have been—some who are here today—working very successfully with the state prison there in Columbia. One of the prisoners in the state prison at Columbia has a story in the upcoming *Intro* of the Associated Writing Programs. They are beginning to write, they're beginning to do plays and one thing and another. Once again, we are training some very good teachers who know how to read and write, and at the other end of the scale, I think we perform a function at the university that we have a tremendous number of supersophisticated—I'm now talking about the sort of graduate-student mentality—people who ought to be required to go out and write some stories and poems to be judged by their peers after their long period of a diet of masterpieces in which they can casually dismiss any masterpiece. I think they would learn, and this has been proved in certain situations; the standard graduate student learns a new and healthy respect for literature of all kinds, learns that even the second-rate is difficult to do, by writing and by having that experience.

One final question I throw out, because this has come up, too, is this old question that comes up all the time. Should we discourage or encourage, in terms of talent? I don't really think that's our function. My feeling is that we must not lie and perpetuate and continue false illusions about fame, riches, or even happiness or virtue in connection with writing, but it is a free choice of the individual. Many who do not appear to be talented and could not pass a "talent test" of any kind will compensate for this in one way or another and turn out to be fine writers. I base this on the fact—the happy fact—that many writers that I know are not very talented, and some are not very intelligent, and yet I defy you to tell which are which from their works unless you happen to know the writer yourself. In athletics, it was mentioned earlier about the six-foot-three, 230-pound, 10-second—I guess he would have to be a guard now, at that size—football player; that's true, that coaches look very much for certain kinds of physical talent and yet, some of the greatest athletes—I have a little theory about this—have always had a singular physical defect of one kind or another that had to be compensated for, and therefore required them to think. Mickey Mantle's knees, for example; Bob Cousy was not very tall—if he had done it entirely on that basis, he would never have played basketball. He lacked the initial aptitude, compensated for it by free choice, exercised that choice, and became magnificent. I think this can happen with us, too; therefore, my answer to my own question is: it is not our purpose to discourage anybody, and I won't discourage you all any more, I'm going to sit down. Thank you.

Coleman:

Before calling on Theodore Morrison and Wallace Stegner, may I tell you that I have seen in the audience the face of one of our friends, Richard Eberhart of Dartmouth, and a former Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress, and I want to ask that, after Mr. Stegner speaks, we will welcome any statement that you have to make.

Theodore Morrison:

Simply apropos of the question of encouragement, at Bread Loaf we used to recognize the fact that, since we were human and reasonably kindly and not too malicious, we knew that we would encourage people, whether we intended to or not on principle, and we used to feel a little uneasy about that, so we used to say, "There ought to be a sign prominently on the campus here saying, 'Encouragement ahead, pass at your own risk.' "

I have very much envied the wit that has been flying around this room, and I'm only afraid that in contrast with it I will sound a little lugubrious, but I should like to try to outline a conception of the principal business under discussion here which will be mine, and I don't think there will be anything exclusive about it; I hope there will be some things that others will share. I'm a little struck by what some of the preceding speakers have said. It seems to me they have given the teaching of writing, or the effort to teach writing, or the opportunity to learn writing, in this country, in colleges and universities, a history that's too brief. At any rate, I won't hesitate to say that at my university, Harvard, the tradition of this attempt, the attempt to provide an opportunity in which students can presumably learn to develop themselves as writers, goes back a long way. I haven't boned up on the history—I didn't foresee this little point coming up, so I can't give you a date—but when I was an undergraduate, graduating in 1923, several generations ago, the tradition of writing was strongly entrenched, and it went back I don't know how many decades before that. I think it is true that since World War I, and approaching World War II and since World War II, the kind of current that we're interested in has gathered force and spread and widened and deepened. But, actually, it's a tradition of considerably longer standing. Now, I don't quite know why I'm here; am I here because I was director of the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference for 23 years, or am I here because I was one among a number of teachers at Harvard for 40 years and more who have engaged in this attempt? I believe, in this dim light, I see one of my ever-so-recent colleagues, Monroe Engel, sitting back in the audience. Monroe and Robert Fitzgerald and I have, until this year when I retired, all been engaged in teaching courses of this sort.

Now, my own feeling has always shied away, a little bit, from the word *program*. It's perfectly true that I ran a writers' conference, or tried to, and the conference had to have a program, and it was my responsibility to try and see that it did. Some colleges have had plans for writers that seem to me too programmatic. Layers of courses following each other, divisions of courses under the personal essay, and the this and the that, and journalism and so on, and perhaps either a major at the end of it, or some special tag on the degree, or whatnot. I simply confess that, for me, I have not found programizing to that extent congenial. It's perhaps because personally I've been a bit of a lone wolf. I think of the profitable relation between a teacher and a writer as largely personal; of course, with the presence of the undergraduate or perhaps graduate group who form the class and who do a lot of teaching each other, we'd all no doubt grant that, but it seems to me an important part of the enterprise is that the teacher sits down in solitude with the student, having read the student's work, and some kind of engagement takes place between them. I like it that way, and that's the way it rather seems to me that the enterprise goes best. Now, I don't want to outline a program; let me call it a conception, a personal conception of some way in which this whole problem can be approached without leaving it merely to impulse, or the accidents of the moment, or the particulars of personal relations. The conception I have in mind, I hope, would be based on some assessment of what I think—I won't say what students need because, you know, it's dangerous to judge what someone else needs, but some sense of what I think students can profit by. And so this means also, some sense of what a teacher might be expected to try and accomplish. Now, it seems to me the difficulty with this, as in all education, is that there is so much to do, so many, in some ways, different things to do. It's all nicely summed up in the New Testament, which I cannot quote accurately, but which I can paraphrase I think with sufficient preciseness for the occasion: This ought ye to have done, and not to have left the other undone. This, to me, is practically the whole problem of education; there is so much to do that none of us can hope to do it all, and so in this conception of the job that I am trying to think out, I have very much a sense of personal failure, or if not failure, at any rate, limitation. "This ought ye to have done, and not to have left the other undone." I have a lively sense of things that I have left undone, and of course the usual teacher's doubts about anything I may have done. But, let me be a little personal and historical. When I was an undergraduate, I took courses with Le Baron Russell Briggs as my writing coach, and by the way, I approve of that use of the word *coach*, I think it's entirely appropriate. You don't necessarily always go looking for an end who's going to be a star because of his speed, coordination, physical proficiency, and so on. I take it what a coach does is look over his—well, let's say, quarter-mile squad—if he has a naturally qualified quarter-miler, physically speaking, he's tickled, but otherwise, he starts looking at the material he has, and he can probably say something about how to run the quarter-mile which will make a better quarter-miler of one who has any qualifications at all. Now, I suppose when I studied with Dean Briggs, it was in the fag end of what used to be called, what George Santayana called, the genteel tradition. What we got from Dean Briggs was a very strict and exacting rhetorical training. He told us how to write an English sentence, or, more properly speaking, when we wrote incorrect or sloppily constructed English sentences, he elaborately reconstructed them for us and showed us the principles involved—where to put the adverbial modifiers, how to use the old devices of balance and parallelism and all that kind of thing—and may I say that I am profoundly grateful for that training. I think that students can profit by it, I would even assert more and say that they need it, and that a great part of the basis of a writer's equipment may very well need to take exactly this form. I am finding the training I had from Dean Briggs—oh, almost 50 years ago—very useful to me at this moment. In retirement, I am trying to write a book, and this is a book of a kind I have never attempted before. I have attempted novels and verse, written mostly out of my imagination; this book calls for historical narrative and exposition, and I find the training—the exact rhetorical training I got from Dean Briggs 50 years ago—valuable to me at the moment, and that value has a money tag on it; it's as practical as that.

Now, "this ought ye to have done;" I still think we ought to be doing this, but a complication ensues. When I was writing for Dean Briggs back in those distant generations, the standard of language was genteel, shall we say; I think that's the proper word for it, and vernacular, argot, lingo, the grunts and groans of the counterculture and so on, would not have been a problem. Now they are. Any teacher nowadays would have to deal with the vernacular as a medium, or with various kinds of lingo or argot that a writer may use personally with his peers or may have been acquainted with through work, or through experience of one sort or another. Now, I can't go into this problem, obviously, or—I mean, this would be a full lecture or more in itself. I can only allude to it. But I say, this does create a problem, and it's a further epicycle in the problem of "this ought ye to have done, and not to have left the other undone." We need to teach the English language in the purest form in which it exists today, if there's any purity left in it at all. We also need to illustrate, and, in appropriate cases—and every case might not be appropriate, but in some cases—encourage explorations in the vernacular and one or another of what in the past would have been called the nonliterary uses of the language for purposes of fiction, perhaps for purposes of poetry, or for purposes of drama.

As time went on and I found myself unexpectedly saddled with a writers' conference, for example, I began to encounter other influences: Bernard De Voto, whose life Wallace Stegner has written and which he's going to make a fascinating book next season; a wonderful teacher, Edith Mirrielees—I don't know whether anyone, whether more than two or three people in this room have heard of her—at this time, she was an extraordinary teacher. And from them I began to get a sort of a different conception of what you deal with in talking about writing, and I will sum this up by the crude and unsatisfactory term *technique.* I just don't know a better word to use at the moment, though I would have a quarrel with that if I could think of anything more elegant. Oh, you know, the point of view, the means of perception, if you want to call it that, the way in which the reader is related to what he is reading by this and other means, problems of characterization, problems of how you deal with the theme in a fiction without making it into a lecture; well, the whole range of problems embraced under this rather crude word, *technique*. I began to become more acquainted with such problems largely through the influence of other people on me. I began to be fascinated by them. I found myself concentrating more and more of my own classroom attempts at teaching on this range, and frequently I would pull myself up and become uneasy. I was not paying enough attention to the fundamental rhetoric, which is, I think, the indispensable underpinning of most writers, with the exception of the pure naturals, you know, who do it their own way and have to be left alone. So again, "this ought ye to have done, and not to have left the other undone."

Now one final word. I think that, if we make any effort to teach anything about writing or to guide the students, fundamentally it's an attempt to give them an opportunity to learn, and teaching should never be understood as anything else. But if we're going to try to provide this opportunity, and guide it, and if we are teachers and sit behind desks and have what faint shreds of authority may be left in these days, we surely have to attempt some degree of guidance. If we're going to do that, then what we have to teach in the classroom or to try to explain or to try to bring to light is largely—this is my feeling—largely middle-of-the-road counsel, rather conventional, changing from time to time, as the ongoing experimentation in writing adds new weapons to the writer's quiver, but nonetheless at any given time probably it is going to be largely middle-of-the-road, fairly settled, fairly conventional counsel. You cannot teach originality, by definition; if you can teach it, it isn't originality; it would be a contradiction in terms. How then, do we deal with the problem of originality? Well, I think, first of all, we have to recognize it when it occurs, and, of course a personal prejudice of mine now is that what can loosely be summed up as avant-garde or experimental writing has long since ceased to be original. I don't think we look for originality, necessarily, certainly not exclusively, in that kind of thing. A writer is original when he gets back to some kind of source, when he sees anything without a veil, a side bag of influence from somewhere else, a good naked fresh look at an object, an emotion spontaneously and sincerely felt. What is it Emerson says, "A man's simplicity consists in his power to utter the truth without loss." Anyone who can tell the truth without loss is in one sense original. I'm not sure that isn't the highest sense of originality. Originality can also be methodological, I suppose. There's the originality of innovation, and there's the originality of freshness of vision. Now, the first thing we can do with originality is try and recognize it, not muff it when it comes along. Then we can try to praise and encourage it, then we can raise with the class the question whether it is true originality or whether it is, you know, mere tinkering with methodology or whatnot. In this realm, perhaps, will lie our discussion of this all-important, but difficult, question. These are my remarks, ladies and gentlemen, and thank you all very much.

Coleman:

It is good to know that in the audience is Mr. Coley Taylor, representative of the University of the Américas at Mexico City. Will he please try to come to the Poetry Office upstairs after this meeting? And now, Wallace Stegner.

Wallace Stegner:

There's an old ballad, maybe not a very old ballad, called, "Seven Years With the Wrong Woman Put Me in this Dirty Jail." I feel a little bit that way, because I've been, it just occurred to me, 43 years in this business, and I don't say it's the wrong woman, but it can be, sometimes, a jail. I think that Paul Engle and I were among the very first guinea pigs at Iowa in 1930. I then went to Harvard and learned a great deal from Ted Morrison, and I went to Bread Loaf and learned a great deal more from Ted Morrison and Benny De Voto, so that I have been, as it were, through the course, and then I took it to Stanford and applied adaptations of it on the West Coast. I would agree with Mr. Morrison that the tradition in the United States is very much older than Bread Loaf, very much older than Iowa, very much older, perhaps, than any of us realize. It goes back at least as far as Barrett Wendell, and Dean Briggs, and Copey [Charles Townsend Copeland], all of whom were old men by the time I knew them, but who were teaching De Voto in 1915, and De Voto himself was a kind of Typhoid Mary of this short of teaching. I don't feel confessional exactly, but I do. Since I have retired from the business just recently, I have had some thoughts about whether I have wasted my life, or whether I have fulfilled anything, or whether I have done any good, and the question with which we opened was part of that self-examination. For one thing, I've tried to do what almost everybody in this room, I'm sure, is trying to do, which is to moonlight, to be both a writer and a teacher, not to be strictly a teacher, but to keep my own writing going and afloat against some of the odds that a university puts in the path. Frank O'Connor used to say, "The minute you catch yourself *thinking*, worrying more about your students' writing than about your own, you're done, man, then you realize." On the other hand, there have been teachers like Walter Van Tilburg Clark, who was a splendid teacher of writing and a splendid writer, who I think gave so much to his students that these students literally helped him stop writing the last 10 years of his life. I think a meeting like this is an appropriate time to think about somebody like Walt Clark, because if you're thinking of the teachers who have influenced any number of people, and talented people, people of real quality, he would certainly be one of them. Yet he did it, I think, at a sacrifice to himself, which I, for one, I confess, have never been quite willing to make.

How much does one teach, and exactly what does one teach, in a writing class? I'll be talking about that some more tomorrow afternoon, or tomorrow morning, but it seems to me that one teaches in the Dean Briggs sense a great deal at earlier levels to undergraduates. You can teach them quite a lot, if they're teachable at all. They very rapidly outrun the teaching, but you can teach, literally, a body of rhetoric in which I would include the technique that Bread Loaf used to specialize in. As a matter of fact, when I was writing De Voto's biography recently, I finally realized what I should have realized a long time ago—how much I got from the participation in Bread Loaf and from association with Ted Morrison and Benny De Voto, and Edith Mirrielees. I caught myself, as a matter of fact, reading in Benny De Voto's notes or in Edith Mirrielees' letters, phrases and intuitions and understandings of literature that I thought I had invented. I am confessional, I'm sorry about that. There is a certain amount of real instruction that one can do. There is, on the other hand, very often, it has seemed to me—and this is one of the things that's troubled me as I've considered all these years with that woman—a tendency not to teach but to permit, simply to permit, to be an inert center, perhaps, without any voltage, without any motion, and I'm not sure about that, and we'll be talking about that some more tomorrow morning, too.

I don't believe in programs any more than Mr. Morrison does. I do believe in the recognition of what comes from the class itself and the attempt to deal with that in its own terms *ad hoc* (another phrase that I borrowed from Benny De Voto). On the other hand, I think that the notion that one must enthuse one's students is obscene. If they want to write, they shouldn't have to be enthused by the teacher. I would much rather discourage that kind, I guess. I think I would do my best to; if I couldn't, all right, I've done them good, in any case. If you can't discourage them, that's a pretty good sign. But enthusiasm is a different thing from stimulation. The stimulation they can get from their peers, from their teachers, from a situation, from the environment that one hopes to create in a writing program, and that stimulation is all to the good, since as John Ciardi, I guess, said, "a writer is always, at some stage in his life, and perhaps all his life, a group animal."

I do think that in teaching writing for that long I have been in the position of training people for a profession which barely exists. You don't turn out writers the way you turn out chemists or any thing of the kind, and it's a very, very highly speculative racket. All you can do is to try to make that particular writer the best writer he can be, if he really wants to be the best writer he can be, and sometimes he doesn't, and then you have to let him alone. And to do it in his terms, too—not to be the kind of coach who sends in the plays, but really to let him be the quarterback, you know, to let him run it. In that case, I don't know what you are. You're not so much a coach as a kind of a film that he can study afterwards, you know, he can look the films of the game over as you have kept them for him. I do think that there is such a thing as spending so much time upon the teaching of writing, upon the teaching of the mere methodology of writing, and the mere practice, which is indispensable, nevertheless, sometimes overdone. It does seem to me that literary people always tend to overbid their information, and it doesn't hurt any literary person to know something, to know something substantive, in which case, rhetoric alone is not ever going to suffice. Rhetoric is a kind of wire on which things run, but you've got to have some voltage from something else.

All of this business of first, in effect, luring, enticing, with fellowships and other kinds of opportunity, a body of young writers to an institution, and hoping to send them out trained professionally in a profession which barely exists, is a dubious enterprise, and I do sometimes have doubts of it, which I can probably elaborate more. On the other hand, when it works, when it is working well it is the most inspiring and enspiriting kind of teaching that I know. I don't know any other kind of teaching which comes even close. It's Socratic to a degree, and that's a very difficult thing to do, to be a kind of Socrates. And this I think we're inclined to forget, when you have the students who don't have to be enthused, when you have the students who are not simply getting an easy four credits and loafing through something because they know they can get an "Incomplete," when you have students who really want to write, who have the motivation in the first place, and who come to you because they think maybe there's something here that they can beg, borrow, or steal—and you can steal, according to Hemingway, from anything you're better than, and you sometimes are better than teacher, so steal from him if you can—when you get that kind of students, you are dealing with life forces, actually, of a daunting kind. You are dealing with people's guts, and I have seen quite a lot of guts in 43 years. You know, I've seen one student, for instance, who was of that kind who's been mentioned this morning, the kind who thinks that you can set a goal and, with intelligence and diligence and perseverance, can make your way to it. This boy was a gymnast and he had done it, you know, on the parallel bars and the horses and so on, he could stand on his hands and walk around the block on his hands, he could do double flips and all the rest. He had proved it with his body, that he could take that kind of program and set himself to do it. He set himself to become a writer in the same way, and on Christmas eve one year, he cut his three childrens' throats and cut his wife's. These are people's blood you are dealing with when you say to somebody, "You can't do it," or when you say to somebody, "You can do it," and then he proves to himself later that he can't. I don't think that any of us is qualified to be a therapist, and yet we do get, in writing courses, a good deal of what amounts to the therapeutic. I don't think I would go as far as Benny De Voto in assuming that all fiction is somehow what happens in the caverns of the soul, and that it bubbles up in a kind of self-therapeutic way but under a little bit of control. I'm not quite sure I believe all that, and yet I know that that takes a large part of the time and the emotional energy of people who are trying to write, and that, I think, also takes of the teacher the kind of understanding, or the kind of attempt at understanding, which some teachers often are too harried, too busy, too concerned with their own writing, maybe; too involved in departmental meetings, too involved in acting like a full professor, to deal with. It's very, very personal, indeed. You're more than a coach, you're everything, you're wife, mother, father-confessor, the whole works, to somebody who is that involved and whose emotions are that raw and that much in need of saving, and these are by no means always the untalented, either, that we're talking about. These are sometimes the most talented, and I've seen enough of those in my 43 years with this woman to feel that the teaching of writing is a terrible and humbling task when it's done right to the people who, perhaps, most need it. I'll leave it at that.

Coleman:

May we hear from Richard Eberhart for a few moments, please?

Richard Eberhart:

Professor Coleman, colleagues and friends, the Librarian, Mr. Mumford, my old friend, Roy Basler, my new friend, Josephine Jacobsen, ladies and gentlemen.

The term *creative writing* has always made me uncomfortable, as if it were a misnomer. I would like a substitute for it and to propose *imaginative writing.* My college Webster says of the word *imaginative:* 1) having, using, or showing imagination; having creative or productive talent; able to imagine or fond of imagining; 2) of or resulting from imagination: as, imaginative literature.

Whenever I see the term *creative writing* I am balked as if a blanket were thrown over a fire and smothered it. There was a fire there, the fire of creation, but the term *creative writing* put it out. The term *creative writing* became heavily associated with its institutionalization, with endless creative writing courses and teachers across the land, yet with nothing leaping to mind instantly as a flame of creative writing. Who are the creative-writing poets, who the creative-writing prose writers?

I think the word *creative* in the two-word context is the trouble, because cannot you say, in a sense, that all writing is creative, thus negating the special meaning wished for and indicated in the title? By this I mean something as logical and elementary as, for instance, a reviewer writing a review. Is he not creating words in order, is he not putting together sequences of words not put together before in the same way, is he not in fact creating language for what he has to say and is he not therefore a creative writer? This may strike you as humorous or as a reduction to too great a simplification, but it always got in the way of my appreciating the accepted term *creative writing* as concerning only the true flare of creation it is supposed to indicate. To state my reduction flatly, all writing is creative writing because it is something created, and therefore I feel uncomfortable with *creative writing,* usually capitalized, as a grand expression for *imaginative writing,* which is the term I prefer.

I doubt, however, that the above remarks will change the accepted term to my proposed term, so heavy is the grip of institutionalization on language. We will go on teaching creative writing courses with unclear means of determining or evaluating the results.

Think for a moment of the vast improvement of our culture and thus of our civilization if in every instance for the next several decades *imaginative writing* were uttered instead of *creative writing*. How many instances would there be? Let us say tens of thousands. If every one of these used the word *imaginative*, would it not tend to make people more imaginative? They would have held before them all the time this great, exciting, evocative word. It would permeate their minds and their souls. The whole nation, in a sense, would become aware of imagination and of the imagination. If it became more aware of this exalted part of our beings, would the nation not come to have more imagination, would we not become a more imaginative people, would we therefore not create better works of imagination in writing, and would we not therefore arise to a higher state of culture? By saying *imaginative writing* ten thousand times in every catalog and mention of writing between now and 2000, I believe we would have asserted a psychological truth and, by a seemingly simple transfer of terms, might have made strides and leaps of imagination, daring an enlargement of our scope.

But, as I said, I doubt if we will do this. And as in governments and Presidents, we will get what we deserve. We will go on with what we call creative writing, a blanketing term putting out a fire.

Accepting the term of this congress, however, let me say that the creative-writing poets are those who have a kind of wildness in them, a flow of imagination. What I term the noncreative-writing poets are those in whom form, established or new forms, predominates, in which the wildness and creative flow are curtailed and dominated by form or forms controlled by the rational mind.

I have made up lists of both types, and some in between, with elements of both, but I recognize this as an arbitrary game. It is exciting to think of naming living poets, but safer to treat with the dead. I would say that D. H. Lawrence was a creative-writing poet but that T. S. Eliot was not. Cummings was a creative-writing type but Robinson was not. Dickinson, Williams, and Stevens, for all their differences, had some of the imaginative flow I posit (although hardly a poet is pure in this regard on either side of the proposition), but Masters, Frost, and Marianne Moore had not. Hardy would not be in the creative writing category, perhaps because of being too close to prose, but Hart Crane in "The Bridge" would be included. I would put Dylan Thomas in, despite the complexities of his form, but I would hold Yeats out—but you see how complicated this can become and how many reservations you would have to make for certain poems of any poet on either side. In the end, my whole argument may be too arbitrary.

I hope this congress will decide what creative writing is, how to evaluate it, and what is its value in the nation.

Thank you.

Coleman:

Perhaps some people may want to settle some differences with you outside, sir. Now, patient audience, statements and questions.

Audience:

Why, whenever anybody starts to talk about literature or poetry or writing, suddenly a flow of metaphors about games, and of coach, and all that? I'd like to address that particularly to Mr. Ciardi.

Ciardi:

What immediately comes to my mind is Robert Frost's "Only where love and need are one/and the work is play for mortal stakes." I think that's part of the answer. The German critic, Baumgarten, did an essay called "Der Spiel Trieb" ("The Play Impulse") and he pictures it as basic to all esthetics. You try to say that in Italian, it comes out *giuoco,* and you're booed down, because *giuoco* is what children do. But, I think since form is involved, form is not necessarily an arbitrary imposition, but it's something like an arbitrary imposition, it's like the rules of a game. The rules of any game are a way of making it hard for the fun of it, and I think any formality involves that, and that there is this game analogy which eventually has to be shattered. But first—Frost said it again—"Freedom is moving easy in harness." First, you have to take on the harness, then you dream of moving easy in it.

Coleman:

Thank you. You know, I think that it's time to stop until the afternoon.

NOTES

[1] Wallace Stegner and Richard Scowcroft, eds., *Twenty Years of Stanford Short Stories* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1966), p. x. © 1966 by the Board of Trustees of the Leland Stanford Junior University. Selections used by permission.

[2] Ibid., pp. xi-xii.

The Writing of Poetry

Paul Engle, chairman; Michael Dennis Browne, John Ciardi, Elliott Coleman, Josephine Jacobsen, Anthony McNeill, N. Scott Momaday, Miller Williams

Paul Engle:

I should like to make a note of thanks, not for myself alone, but on behalf of all writers, and especially of all poets, and using the phrase in its most argumentative meaning, creative writers, a note of thanks to the Library of Congress, this room, all of those at the Library who have so kindly acknowledged that, in this country, there are people called writers. In particular, there are people called poets. I propose now to speak on the subject of the teaching of the writing of poetry.

The old cry used to be: you can't make a writer.

Oh yes, you can. You can take him young, insecure, and worried. You can make him old, insecure, and worried.

Of course, you can't create a creative writer. Yet neither can you create a scientist. The basic talents must be there, but they can certainly be threatened, praised, tormented, and shaped into excellence, and much earlier than if they worked alone. Yet why a university? When I first began teaching "creative writing," the enemy was behind every tree. I traveled armed and listened for the running footstep behind me. The university, it was said, would destroy the poet, and the poet would corrupt the university. Worse, he might even divert a few dimes from the scholarly budget.

There is a story of twin boys who hated each other. When they grew up into very large men, they left home and never communicated. One became an admiral, the other a bishop in the church. The admiral was a model of discipline and physical conditioning, the bishop grew in girth as well as in wisdom. One day they met on a railway platform. Seeing only one person in uniform, the bishop jerked a finger at it and pointed to the luggage at his feet, swelling his dress: "Boy," he called, "carry my bags." The admiral stared, before saying, "Madame, in your condition, you should not travel."

Such bitterness between poet and scholar (who *was* the poet in that story?) existed on campus until many books of excellent poetry proved the point and brought them together. One reason for suspicion, I believe, was that the other arts, painting, composing, had been taught without question but poetry had not been regarded as an "art." Could such private exclamations of delight or anguish be taught? In Ireland, schools of poetry existed thousands of years ago. When Keats told Shelley to "load every rift" with ore (he quoted Spenser's line, "With rich metall loaded every rifte"), he said what teachers of writing in this room would be saying today if they were not here.

The older poet has often advised the younger, even if not asked. Teaching creative writing is simply advice organized, regularly available, with a name and number. The personal confrontation is the same, friend or teacher.

T. S. Eliot wrote that Ezra Pound (that teacher of Yeats also)

> . . . induced me to desroy what I thought an excellent set of couplets; for, said he, "Pope has done this so well that you cannot do it better; and if you mean this as a burlesque, you had better suppress it, for you cannot parody Pope unless you can write better verse than Pope—and you can't."[1]

It is sad to think that Eliot regarded his thin couplet as excellent—a teacher of writing could have told him! As the edition of *The Waste Land* published last year from the original manuscript clearly shows, the ruthless cutting of many passages by Pound, by Eliot's wife, and by Eliot himself, immensely improved the text. If a poet's friends and his wife can make a poem better, why cannot another poet whose title happens to be "teacher" rather than friend? The young poet living in his trailer, that 20th-century attic on wheels, after some months of having his verse sympathetically and objectively criticized, is going to mature faster, just as Keats did. He will write better shaped poems, as Eliot did.

The astonishing flexibility of approach and subject matter is the American university's contribution to education. If there is an activity of man which is useful or attractive, let us study it. With that attitude, it was easy to fit creative writing into a universiy curriculum. If you could study poetry, why should you not create it? I think one of the problems lay in the nature of the material for each art. Stone, wood, canvas, oils, chisels, brushes, pianos, violins—these were obviously instruments for art. But the material for verse is the daily language in which we call dogs and our children, order food, comment on weather, talk with wife or husband or friend, swear at the car. The power of poetry is to make art out of those plain and brutal words.

Yet there is a genuine issue in the matter of the so-called "creative" becoming a part of a campus. The university originally was intended to give knowledge. Poetry is not knowing, but feeling; although there may be wisdom in the poem, it must be felt, not merely understood. The poet is not describing or analyzing a subject, but offering his vision of it. What mattered to fatally sick Keats, haunted by mortality, sensing death crawl over the fingers with which he wrote, was not the beauty of the Grecian urn, but his regret that he would die and that object would outlive him. And that he would never marry Fanny Brawne.

But is a university a place for visions? If it is not, then it is not universal and one broad stretch of the human landscape is ignored. There is nothing easy here, for the poet is not the scholar. One week years ago we discussed the poems of a veteran back from the war, his first experience of public criticism. He paled, he sweated, he trembled. The nerves were not thrown in patterns on a screen, they were lying there visible on the dreadful floor. The poems were his vision of his life at an especially troubled time. They won the Pulitzer Prize. Of course a talent like that belongs in a university; his presence enriches the teaching of all poetry, past or present.

The long American landscape is another reason for the university's usefulness for creative people. New York is not for the poet what London and Paris are. It is important to have communities across the country where the writers can cluster together and make sure that they are not eccentric simply because they want to write poetry. Even in the performing and visual arts, where New York is certainly the leader, it is a reasonable guess that many of the artists came out of universities. We have tried to make our own creative writing work not so much a way of dealing with individual talents, but bringing in poets from all directions and establishing a community of gifted people who learn as much from each other as from our teaching.

One aspect of poetry which has troubled many critics of creative writing is a misunderstanding of what poetry really is. The old phrase, "There's more truth than poetry in that," is dead wrong. It should read, "There is more truth in poetry than there is in truth." By its intensity, poetry heightens truth into a more sensuous expression. The poet himself is tougher than the American newspaper tradition which always puts news of poetry (and all arts) under the woman's page. That first beatnik, Baudelaire, defying his conventional father-in-law by his way of life, by his clothes, by his poetry, was still eager to get a book in print to prove that he was a genuine poet. Yet when proof at last came from the printers, Baudelaire kept it months correcting small phrases and whole lines, a painful and expensive process. He did that out of artistic pride, at the loss of respect from the general who lost a leg at Waterloo and wondered when his strange stepson was going to WORK. That sort of intellectual rigor belongs on a campus.

The combination of a weekly workshop where students hear the work of others discussed, with an individual critical session when enough poems accumulate, has been a reasonable teaching method. Yet what does that word "teach" really mean? We are not teaching a table of atomic weights, but words which are emotionally weighted. When Baudelaire said, "I have taken the mud of your streets, O Paris, and made from it gold," he was describing the process of any poet. We try to show the young that this is indeed the sort of transmutation that poetry demands. To smear only the mud on the page is not poetry. It takes years, sometimes, to learn that. The painful phrase-by-phrase, line-by-line putting down of the vision is the poet's way, and the painful phrase-by-phrase and line-by-line scrutiny is the teacher's way.

There are many things the teacher can do for the young poet. The most important is to make him his own self-critic, so that he reads his poems as if they had been written by his worst enemy (alas, that is often true), searching savagely for any weakness.

He can be made to understand that the experience which matters for his art is in the language, not in the life outside. From the shy cave of her Amherst room, Emily Dickinson wrote truer and more life-filled poems than did Colonel Higginson, who had gone through the Civil War.

He can be made to understand that the emotion which matters is not in himself, but the shape he gives to it in the poem. Flaubert once told his girl friend that she should write more coldly, which is what you would expect from a man who said that, when he saw a beautiful woman, he thought only of her skeleton. That is carrying artistic distance too far. But his point is absolute and correct when he said: "You can depict wine, love, and women on the condition that you are not a drunkard, a lover, or a husband. Your sight is affected by suffering and enjoyment." It is warmly French to make this distinction between lover and husband, but there is no doubt that too great an involvement distorts the eyes.

The student poet can be told that however much intuition is indispensable to the origin of a poem, the working it on the page is a product of the whole man and not merely his instinctive area. There is a manuscript of Emily Dickinson's which has a blank in one line. On the margin she has written a row of words from which she was unable to choose one. You can select the one which seems to you best, or you can fill in your own. In brief, there is a conscious way of enhancing the intuitive. That overprecious protectiveness toward his own verse is a familiar sight to all of us who have taught, and it has to be destroyed. Flaubert's advice of a kiss on the brow and a kick on the behind is still useful to the young writer. The motion of the meaning on the page is the poem. The young poet must be given Dylan Thomas' shrewd remark: "I do not mind from where the images of a poem are dragged up; drag them up, if you like, from the nethermost sea of the hidden self; but, before they reach paper, they must go through all the rational processes of the intellect." Thomas denies all language put fresh on the page as it emerges from the chaos of the unconscious.

He should learn that a work of art is work, that it is not merely a cry of self-pity. Quote him those lines of Rainer Maria Rilke, in which he says that the real poet must overcome that

ancient curse of poets,
always bewailing themselves instead of saying,
always sitting in judgment on their feeling
instead of shaping it; always supposing
that what is sorrowful in themselves or joyful
is something to be known and in a poem
lamented or celebrated. Invalids,
using a language full of woefulness
as a means to describe for us just where it hurts them,
instead of transmuting themselves into the words,
doggedly, as the carver of a cathedral
transfers himself to the stone's constancy.[2]

He should be made aware of the destructive force of the poet's ego, poetry not being a self-expression alone but a celebration of life itself. As Paul Valéry wrote, poetry is a holiday of the mind. The brain helps the nerves handle their joy and suffering. "I like a look of agony because I know it's true." The swamp of ego through which the young poet wades is real and restraining.

He can be urged to look at the variorum editions, those patiently detailed records of how the poets in English struggled to perfect their poems. The scholars have given us this great insight into the workings of the imagination. Think of the variants of meaning for the word "rooky," in Shakespeare's line, "The crow makes wing to the rooky wood." When scholars in the bad old days would argue that poetry was too elusive a thing for a university, I would cite the wild speculations by scholars on the meanings of words in the Shakespeare text.

Perhaps the greatest modern example is William Butler Yeats, who in his old age went back to the poems he had written in the luxuriance of language and emotion in his youth, before he had been taught creative writing by that tough-minded, dirty-speaking poet from potato country, Ezra Pound of Idaho. Every time the poet chooses one word rather than another, he is being a critic. When he then returns after 50 years to push the words around one more time, he is admitting that the imagination and the mind mutually warm and enhance each other. You have all experienced such an incident as reading a poem in a class, criticizing the last line of what was really a good poem, waiting for the poet, a known fighter, to defend himself. You ask, "Aren't you going to comment?" Silence from the poet while he stares at you in contempt and pity before he sneers, "The *New Yorker* took it yesterday." But the last line was still a weak line, and he learned later, he learned. So back to Yeats, who entered once again each line of his poem and worried it into being a better line. The manuscript of Robert Frost's famous lyric, "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," shows many changes, all of them for the better, all of them heightening the rhythm, the precision, the subtlety. With Yeats it was a problem of softness, of sentimentality, of making the poem stand up to the world and to the poet's own feelings. Here is his example.

The Sorrow of Love [3]

Final revised version

The brawling of a sparrow in the eaves,
The brilliant moon and all the milky sky,
And all that famous harmony of leaves,
Had blotted out man's image and his cry.
A girl arose that had red mournful lips
And seemed the greatness of the world in tears,
Doomed like Odysseus and the labouring ships
And proud as Priam murdered with his peers;
Arose, and on the instant clamorous eaves,
A climbing moon upon an empty sky,
And all that lamentation of the leaves,
Could but compose man's image and his cry.

Early version

The quarrel of the sparrows in the eaves,
The full round moon and the star-laden sky,
And the loud song of the ever-singing leaves
Had hid away earth's old and weary cry.
And then you came with those red mournful lips,
And with you came the whole of the world's tears,

And all the sorrows of her labouring ships,
And all burden of her myriad years.
And now the sparrows warring in the eaves,
The crumbling moon, the white stars in the sky,
And the loud chanting of the unquiet leaves,
Are shaken with earth's old and weary cry.

There are dangers in the teaching of creative writing, too. Having begun when that was a dirty phrase, I can see now that there are too many teaching too many. A book or two is not enough to justify teaching a class or two. Unless there is a standard of excellence demanded from the student, the teaching of creative writing will be properly damned.

Another risk is the dominating teacher, all of whose students are required to write in his manner. You all know places where the little pigs grunted in the same voice as the head boar (excuse the imagery—in Iowa, that is polite conversation). Too many poems could be published without signature and we could say, as of a painting, "That belongs to the School of. . . ."

The trend toward being entirely contemporary and ignoring the literature of the past is a threat. Historical scholars often forgot that the texts they studied from earlier centuries were simply creative writing, done by Chaucer in the elegance of his official job, by John Donne praising his God and his mistress with equal fervor, by Christopher Smart lost in his lyrical madness, by Gerard Manley Hopkins announcing the death of a blacksmith who made such bright and battering horseshoes. But the young poets also forget that past literature is creative writing. Poetry is always contemporary, from the first chanted but not written ballad to our own day. Science progresses, poetry does not. The plays of Sophocles are powerful now, but I should hate to be treated by his ignorant doctor.

Creative writing is closer to the creative in the other arts than it is to the historical scholar in literature. The writer should be close to the painter, the composer, where the imagination is also at work.

The force of creative writing in other languages needs to be a part of an American poet's life. He may not read it in the original, but the poem from anywhere is crucial to him. The Romanian poet in Bucharest is, in time, a closer neighbor now than the Yorkshire poet used to be to the London poet, or the New York poet to the Chicago poet. The carrying over of poetry from one language to another must be, for the rest of this desperate century, a daily fact. To comment on Frost's remark, poetry is that which is *not* lost in translation. To understand the other imaginations of the world is indispensable to survival. To teach creative writing is to teach the human imagination in its great energy. To paraphrase Auden, this is too reckless a century to let language separate us: we must translate or die.

The evidence in published books is solid: creative writing can be taught. A part of that teaching is not only language, but vision. All poetry and teaching should end in Kafka's remark: "Go to your room and think hard enough of the world and it will spin in ecstasy at your feet."

Now, I am told that members of the panel have a kind of priority. As I said to them beforehand, please remember that panelists are people whose duty it is to pan. And you don't have to come up here, those microphones are live.

Josephine Jacobsen:

I'm going to take advantage of the fact that I am a sort of a unique and super guinea pig here, to be the first panelist to speak very briefly. I am completely outside the charmed circle of the teaching of creative writing, never having taught creative writing and never having been a student in a course of the teaching of poetry, so that perhaps I have a certain use in this guinea-pig capacity. I, therefore, plead ignorance in advance to the nuances of the profession and speak entirely as a poet.

There were two very brief things that I wanted to say, one in connection with what Paul said earlier in his talk about the burden that the poet carries in the medium that he uses and the difficulties that he faces that artists using other media do not. I think it is a very interesting point when he says that we use the language in which we carry on our everyday life, in which we order our food and call our dog and talk to our wife and so on. And I think that might be explored even a little more, because I think, also, what adds tremendously to that burden are the connotations that words carry, the tremendous baggage and burden of emotional and social and historical connotations, the fact that with the overuse and misuse of words, they drop out, they go out from under you, they are no longer viable words.

This business about purifying the language of the tribe is something that is constantly at our shoulder. Then there are the fatigue alliances that words make which are the genesis of clichés, in which the poet is already defeated by something, the use of words which, perhaps 25 years ago, might have been fresh, and original. This is another of the terrific hazards. This same kind of thing does not happen to A sharp, or the color yellow, or so on. Then, even more, I think, at the end is my very good friend, the dictionary, a book I dearly love, and perhaps this is the ultimate burden that the poet carries, because this does imply an agreed-upon definition of a word, and no matter how originally the poet uses it or how freely, the word inevitably refers back to some degree to that agreed-upon meaning, and this is a tremendous, an almost unbelievable limitation which is not shared by another artist, and I think perhaps this is one reason why the poet—and perhaps I am prejudiced—is in a unique position, and perhaps poetry is almost the noblest and most difficult of the arts because of this enormous daily burden that it carries. I'd like to hear some of the poets here talk about that a little, and one other thing. Someone from the audience mentioned the coach analogy, and we didn't really get going on that, but I would like to, because I have great reservations about it myself. I feel that as, for instance, John used it, it is certainly absolutely viable, this business of ease and harness, this business of, as Robert Frost pointed out, the net for the game, it's absolutely essential, and in that sense, the discipline that a game imposes, I would certainly agree. However, what I would cavil at very, very much, I think, is the danger of carrying that analogy any farther ,and I doubt, actually, if anyone here would carry it any farther, because (now I'm even on more dubious ground) there was once a character of Noel Coward's who described herself as "Leonora Ames, terrible at games," and I have even less pretension in the field of sports and in the locker room than I have in the teaching of creative writing. However—

Engle:

Do you spend much time in the locker room?

Jacobsen:

No, I never got admitted, that's the problem. I never made it. I do feel that the essential thing that a coach does, really, now how he approaches it, and with what skill he does it, and by what methods he does it is a different matter, but as I get it, what a coach really does is try to win. Now that is, basically, as I can see the function of a coach, he wants the members of his team to win that particular game in that particular season. This is a very deep basis under any coaching, and I think any good coach would admit that when the chips are down, this is really what he is there for. Certainly when the sport becomes a major sport. It seems to me that this is exactly the opposite of what poetry is about. It seems to me that the poem is something which is unique and essentially noncompetitive. It seems to me that the process of poetry is not eliminative, but a question of revelation and discovery. And I do think there is a great deal of locker room coaching in the field of poetry, and I think just in the proportion that it really, in this basic sense—which I know was not how it was used here—enters the field, to that degree, there is a degree of corruption in the picture of poetry, and I'd love to hear what anyone else has to say about that. That's about it.

Miller Williams:

I have a couple of words. I'm disinclined to address myself very much to the question of the efficacy of the teaching of creative writing because it's a loaded room, of course. We have writers here who are involved in creative writing programs, and an audience invited primarily because they were involved in the teaching of creative writing, and a discussion of the viability of it, the efficacy of the idea of teaching creative writing would hold about as many surprises here as a discussion among American bookies whether they like gambling or not, or the views of florists on funerals and weddings.

I think that there are two or three remarks I would like to make, though. I would like to point out a couple of the problems that I find consistently coming up with young poets in our program, at least so that we can have common comfort and common misery, and maybe even suggest some possible approaches to the problems, if they are common. First of all, I'd like to say something about the idea of winning. Robert Frost said something like, when he was shown a poem by a young poet, the first thing he did was look down the right-hand margin at the rhymes to see who won. I think there is a way in which one can win or lose in writing. I might carry the coach metaphor a little further, but what I had in mind when I reached over and pulled the microphone to me, really, was to say that the things that do most bother me in our program with the young poets are these. The continuing belief among a lot of the young poets that the intellect is an outrage to art. This has something to do, I believe, Paul, with the insistence on the contemporaneity, they think somehow that that's very contemporary, to believe that the intellect is an outrage to art. And another and more embarrassing problem we get is that young poets coming into the program haven't read any poetry. This is a terrible thing to say, but they show me their work, and we talk, and I say, "Well, what do you like?" and get almost always the same answer, "Eliot and Auden and Cummings," because the names come quickly to them. They really haven't read, and that's easy enough to deal with, I guess. We can tell them whom they should read, but we end up again giving them the list that we would read and we immediately get into shaping them after ourselves, which is a problem that you brought up that's awfully hard to avoid. I wanted just to throw those out, to see, so that I can have said something and sit back now and let the rest of them talk.

Engle:

May I be forgiven for not having mentioned the names of the people who are talking in case any of you do not know them; Josephine Jacobsen, who is the Consultant in Poetry to the Library this year, and the man who just spoke is Miller Williams. So, who is next?

John Ciardi:

I'd like to endorse a couple of things that Miller Williams said, but I hope the discussion can get fairly specific from here on in. We've all saluted the flag. It seems to me that we've all seen bad writing in classrooms. I will assume that nobody wants to write badly. I will conclude, for a start, that the badness of bad writing is invisible to the author. Part of our job is to try to point out that badness in the hope that it will be recognized and replaced by something not as bad, bit by bit; and that, of course, I think we can do. I did this for a number of years, and then quit as my character firmed. And then after 12 years, for the first time, I find myself back in the classroom, only for 10 weeks. It's a stunning experience. I'd forgotten there was that world in the—I actually had a poem from a graduate student that said, "The gray clouds move across the sky to the gulf." Well, my first thought is that if they're going to move at all, across the sky is a pretty good place, but why tell me that? Where else would the clouds move? Somebody, at some level, has to point out that if clouds move, they're going to be moving across the sky, and it's imbecilic to put in "across the sky."

Now, if a person is all charged up with beauty, his intellect does cut off. I think this is what Miller is saying, but I've had some strange experiences in these last few weeks of teaching. I was trying to explain poetry, or a question would be asked, and I would quote something to illustrate the answer, and two of my students said, "How can you quote so much poetry?" Well, if this were a class in music and we were discussing various kinds of music, and I went to the piano and played out the theme from this, that, or the other to illustrate, I don't think that would be surprising in a music class, but what in heaven's name goes on in a university when students are surprised to find their instructors quoting? I don't know quite what to do with that. I think it has something to do with Miller's statement, "They don't read enough." Or if they have read, they haven't read the same text I read, or not in the same way, because they obviously don't find the same things in it. So I find myself, these past weeks—I hope I get beyond it—saying, "Look, don't tell me it's a black soot engine. I haven't seen any soot in any other color, and I don't want black in there." "Well, it sounds better if I put black in there, you see, the vowel content *a, oo*." I think I have lost this language, I've been working it by feel; in the process of trying to articulate it surprises me all over again. I think what might possibly be useful, maybe would do real things, is that if you ask questions about specific things that come up in the teaching, so that we might compare.

Engle:
That was John Ciardi, in case there is the slightest doubt. So—Mike Browne, Michael Dennis Browne.

Michael Dennis Browne:
I could say something about this business of poets not reading much—

Engle:
Excuse me, the reason he has this odd voice is that he's English.

Browne:
Thank you, Paul. It is extraordinarily important, I think, that poets should come into contact with fine writing of all kinds, and one of the joys of teaching that I find is to try and discern a direction in a young poet and then point out to him that certain people are writing in this way but perhaps taking it much further, but I see it as coming importantly at different places in his life. In, say, a two-quarter session of creative writing, I would begin with all kinds of games and experimentation with no intimidation of reputation or tradition, and, say, in the second quarter, as I'm now doing in two classes, start bringing in a much wider range of poetry from, say, poets of the Greek anthology or translations by poets like Rexroth of Chinese and Japanese, true poets like Neruda and Parra, whom Miller Williams has translated, and provide that range and start to open out the possibilities of imagination and of voice and of diction. At the very beginning, I think it's a very embryonic process of just trying to open out the voice a little bit, to try and clear away things which are standing in the way of a possible voice, and I try and locate one main tendency, one main impulse of imagination, and perhaps in the second quarter, to be specific about it, start to point out which voices have gone in that

direction, and which could be useful to the poet, but at the very beginning, I think, I try and dig into his own possibilities and then slowly put him into contact with other writers. Something like that.

Ciardi:
What do you do when you sense there's no possibility there?

Browne:
Oh, that's a good question. I tell the person that there's no point to go on, or I try and talk about other media that they might be interested in, but that doesn't happen too often.

Williams:
I do a lot of that, too; I ask them if they've tried painting or sculpture.

Ciardi:
I think that's important. If a man wants to write poetry, and is tone-deaf to words, I think he has the wrong medium. It's like trying to paint if you're color-blind—well, Leonard Baskin gets away with it by simplifying his means. He is color-blind, so he doesn't use color. He can still do other things. Or, if you're tone-deaf, the chances are you're not going to write much music, and I think some people are relatively insensitive to words, but maybe their fingers put in clay are smarter than they are. That's what a medium is supposed to do.

Browne:
I think that if someone seems to have nothing, you should never accept what you might call a first diagnosis, that you have a duty to yourself and to the medium to put the person at least through certain paces, to suggest certain things they might like to try or read, because I've seen some extraordinary development in what you might arrogantly call at the beginning unlikely material, so I think that if someone seems to have no talent, then you give them at least a second or a third chance, and then make some kind of decision, but I think initial reactions aren't always going to be true.

Ciardi:
I don't think of this as a first-day decision, I'm thinking of students I've had for a couple of years who come up to me and say, in effect, "Tell me that I should risk my life on being a writer." And that, of course, is an individual decision. I think any teacher is guilty of serious immorality in trying to make life decisions for his student. I think it's

probably better to discourage him, and then if he gets mad at the discouragement, and goes out to prove what a damn fool you are, and proves it, then he has both merit and possibility on his side. Maybe anger is a better motive than sympathy. But certainly we have this problem. I've said many a time, a teacher is a hired sympathy. An editor is a hired something else, and when you go from the teacher who is paid to read you to the end, whether you have earned that reading or not, to an editor who is trying to see how soon he can stop reading you, there can be a traumatic experience in that difference. Have you read it?—meaning have you read and lingered over every word to tell me how good this little tail-end thing is, and most editors do not. They sample, reach the point where they decide they're not going to use it, because it's not usable, and toss it back. They don't have to read to the end. The teacher reads to the end.

Anthony McNeill:

Well, I'm not quite sure what I should say. For one thing, I'm not a teacher of creative writing. For the second, I remember W. H. Auden writing once that he felt like a shabby curate in the presence of scientists. Well, I feel the same way in the presence of artists and teachers, and all the literary and intellectual people. But I think I'll just say one or two things about what some of the panelists have said. The first thing is about this coach bit. As I say, not being a teacher of creative writing, it's sort of presumptuous for me to even say anything about that. But as somebody who attempts to write poems, it seems to me that the objective is to lose as gracefully or as feelingly, or in the case of a great poem—I mean a great poet—as greatly as possible. I think that when you start winning at poetry as a poet then, you know, it becomes dangerous, because it probably means that you have exhausted that area of poetic intelligence. I mean, I think that poetry is to a great extent a search. It's not something original, by any means, you know, and in a sense, the poet always loses.

The second thing is about the business of reading, and that's something that distresses me and distresses me quite a bit, because I think I'm terrifically ill-read. And part of the reason is the curious predicament (and I think the peculiar predicament) of the artist in the West Indies, which all creative writers—I mean the few there are—are always telling us is a cultural wasteland, because we don't really have a right, I would say, to European culture. I sort of feel a sense of unease, as if it doesn't really belong to me, and the culture of Africa is largely oral, so that I always feel like even more of a shabby curate when I sit down to read a classic. So I guess that's about all that I have to say, really.

Jacobsen:

May I leap in and say that I doubt if anything more constructive is going to be said here today than the fact that a poet is someone who always loses.

Engle:

This is Scott Momaday, also a poet.

N. Scott Momaday:

I'm not directly involved with the teaching of creative writing, but I have been involved in the past in creative writing classes as a student, and I must say, frankly, that I've always been a little uncomfortable with the idea of teaching creative writing. But I'd like to see the proposition that creative writing can be taught brought into question and opened to discussion here. I have always had the idea, perhaps it's a kind of prejudice, that writing is a solitary business. It has been for me. It seems to me that when I'm most creatively engaged in the act of writing, I am alone, and moreover, I want to be alone. We heard the proposition this morning that writers exist, create, and are in a sense created in groups, that writing is basically a social activity, and I have no doubt that that is true, at least to an extent. But I think there is a counter proposition to that, that writing is also an isolated kind of activity, and that perhaps it is the first business of the writer to exist in terms of that isolation, and to populate it out of his own imagination, and I wonder if there is any currency in that proposition, how it is where it stands in relation to the idea of teaching the writing of poetry or the writing of fiction in the classroom?

Browne:

Could I talk to that just a minute, Paul? I have a feeling about that, which is that that solitude that you say the writing comes from is certainly true, but again it comes at a certain point in the writer's career. I think that what you get from a community of writers such as I had at Iowa is a sense of an energy level, a sense of excitement, a sense of new possibilities, and the solitude's going to come later anyway, because one day you have to leave. Something that you said earlier was, I wrote down, that we learn more from each other than from the teaching, and I found that what I learned most at Iowa was not so much what I learned directly in the classroom, but just, as I call it, rubbing shoulders with other minds, in sometimes some pretty informal situations, and what I get in a good class, which I might teach or participate in at any level of teaching, is just a bristling sense of nerve ends being opened and somehow wriggling, and one wants to go home and write from that kind of charge that one gets, and then the solitude is absolutely essential. But just as I said earlier that I think you have to bring in the knowledge of other writers at a certain point—I think that the community, the group work, the energy that's created, is really important at a certain point in the writer's life, and in my case it short-cut, I think, many kinds of social intellectual situations, which perhaps gave my solitude more energy.

Ciardi:

I'd like to agree with that, if I may, because I think it's right to the point. No one has ever suggested that writers should sit down at the same table to write. What they should do is sit down at the same table to drink and fight and like one another or hate one another. Then when you get to the pad of paper, it's in a quiet room. That's the solitude. The question is: can the teacher help you bring anything into that solitude; or, having come out of it with a piece of writing, can the teacher lead you to see things in it you have not already seen? My answer is yes. I recall one great example, I think the best—at least the most fruitful piece of criticism I ever produced, ever received. I was at Tufts and John Holmes was my teacher, and I must say he was a tremendously seminal person, in sympathy and lending me books and talking about them and so forth, helping me to take things into my solitude. And when I came out with a poem, I was wild and ecstatic and crazy—I hope I haven't lost all of it, I keep trying to hold onto it. I wrote a poem about watching shark fins in Long Island Sound once, and I was very moved by these shark fins, and as often happens, when you're very moved but haven't done your exercises, you're likely to get a blather, a blather of emotion rather than a poem. That's something that has to be gone through, and I think one of the important jobs of the coach is to change that blather into something else, because it's a true, humanly motivated blather, but it's not writing yet, and what I said at one point, I was being terribly beautiful, I said, "A sense of process, a name of the hunting sea haunts me." You see how big I was in those days, and John Holmes wrote in the margins, "Haunts you, hell, when does it haunt me?" I have never forgotten that criticism, I have never since then even tried to be beautiful. I have tried to explain instead, I have to these days, that it's not necessary for the poet to be beautiful, it's the poem that has to try for that. How else could all the ugly types try to write poems? Look at this panel.

Engle:
Speak for yourself, John.

Ciardi:
I see you have already spoken for yourself.

Engle:
May I quickly say that anyone from the audience who wishes to speak must have a microphone in order to be audible. There are microphones, there are beautiful girls with beautiful microphones, and the reason is not discrimination, it's only so we can really hear you.

Ciardi:
I want to add just one sentence. John Holmes, I think, saved me years the day he wrote that remark in the margin.

Engle:
And that's what it's all about, really, is the saving of time as well as talent. Now, is there a microphone yet up to—Elliott, do you want to comment on this? One moment please, on Mr. Coleman's comment. Don't get discouraged.

Elliott Coleman:
I thought I was supposed to say something. I was convicted this morning by something Theodore Morrison said about our failures, and realized that one of my failures, especially lately, in criticizing younger poets, other people, was not putting them through certain discipline and regular forms—having been brought up in some of them myself and practiced just a few when I was their age, and then coming onto a place where I had to write open, as they call it, poetry, there's hardly any better word for it, and could not think of going back to that kind of discipline—it seems to me that I've been remiss in not subjecting some of our students to those disciplines. Of course, we've read some prosodies, but the shocking thing, one shocking thing, about most modern works of prosody is that they pay no attention to poetry and prose, and that's a subject I'd like to discuss further, but not now. Thank you.

Engle:
Has the microphone reached the young lady, in case my eyes don't betray me, who wanted to speak? In a loud, clear voice.

Audience:

I've almost forgotten just what I was going to say now. But, I tell you, I would like to ask a question. I was in elementary education, so of course it wouldn't reach your sphere of teaching of creative writing, but we work to introduce creative writing to them. Is there any time in the classroom that you take a certain subject and bring it before the class, and pick out certain phases in the subject, and ask each one to discuss some interesting point on that subject, and put it on the board, and then, if you're going to write poetry, ask them to take the words and bring them together in rhyme? Is there any time that that may be done, because I'm guilty of doing things like that.

Engle:

May I comment on that, only quickly. I think this is a wonderful question, and I admire your guilt very much. I think, if I may say so, there are a couple of things you should do immediately. You should get a book called *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams* by Kenneth Koch—who published that, can anyone remember?

Browne:

Chelsea House.

Engle:

Chelsea House, *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams.* Secondly, you borrow a film made of Kenneth Koch teaching the writing of poetry to a New York public school on the lower East Side. The film shows him entering a classroom, it shows the children, you hear the children, I think it was 5th grade. The word I would probably be worried about in your question is the word "rhyme." I don't think it has to rhyme, and I wouldn't bother elementary school children with rhyme, but the effort has been made, it has been described in a book and dramatized in a film, and I think these would show you that what you intend to do is admirable. I think creative writing belongs in the 5th grade as much as it belongs in the university.

Coleman:

Paul, may I interject? I see Richard O'Connell in the house. I wish we could, at one point, make him say something.

Richard O'Connell:

Gee, I really don't have anything to say, you took me by surprise, Elliott.

Engle:

Would you stand up?

O'Connell:

I really don't have that much to add. I was very interested in your remark about using forms in the classroom. Can you hear me?

Ciardi:

Yes.

O'Connell:

And I've been feeling guilty, in line with what was just said, about having my students work with forms again, but I'm in general agreement. I think that, getting back to just the pedagogical problem of teaching poetry in the classroom, there's some value in having students write four lines of iambic pentameter and just going through the paces and maybe showing that against four lines by Yeats in iambic pentameter, and a discussion of, you know, real formal problems, rather than approaching it in terms of group therapy, and that's about all I have to say. Thank you very much.

Browne:

I want to say something about this. I think the Koch book is fine; it has limitations, but it's a good book. What's good about it is that the cues are language cues, you get a line and you take the line somewhere, you don't intimidate it by subject matter, and I think in some ways the use of repetition in all kinds of complex ways is the contemporary poet's equivalent for the use of rhyme in older poetry. And in answer to, or in refer[illegible] to Mr. Coleman's statement, I think that to encourage vivid, [illegible] associational thinking is just as much a discipline as going [illegible]gh forms. I personally don't approve of either going through fo[illegible]r using rhymes. I think that they're not useful any more, becau[illegible]hink that we can say that repetition and pushing apart the gaps [illegible]etween objects and their actions, reassigning the functions metaphorically, is what poetry is tending to do now.

Jacobsen:

Mr. Browne, could I say just one thing about that? I think that children have such a passionate joy in, and predilection for, rhyme, is the only thing I would say. If you think of their games, the spontaneous street games that grow up, there is a tremendous thing with children for rhymes, and I would agree with you against the idea of forcing it upon them, or even giving them the impression this is how you write poetry; but I certainly don't think you can rule it out, because I think it is a peculiarly joyful experience to a child to work with rhymes. It's something exciting, almost intoxicating, you know.

Browne:

When it occurs spontaneously—when I did work down in North Carolina, I was amazed at how joyful it was. It's just that, as a general experience with young children particularly, rhyme seems to prevent them from saying what they want to say, doesn't open them up, but closes them down; but when it occurs spontaneously, it's marvelous.

Engle:

When I was very small, I had an uncle who was a blacksmith, and he read poetry, and I shall never forget his enchanting me—I'd never heard of a rhyme before—by quoting a poem which consisted only of one rhyme, and the title of the poem was "Fleas," and the poem was "Adam had 'em." And from then on, I was hooked. I wanted to write poetry, and I've been scratching ever since.

Jacobsen:

There you are.

Ciardi:

I still worry about one thing in the public school classroom. I don't have an answer. There seems to be a need to praise the young, no matter what they've done, at least the public school system is dedicated to this. It starts when you have them put their grubby little fingers into finger paints in kindergarten, and then you tell them how wonderful their smear is. You don't point out to them that it's impossible to do a bad fingerpainting, and therefore it's impossible to do a good one. But there's a need for that, I don't know the balance in this. But there's also a need, it seems to me, if we are going toward the arts, to begin to develop criteria much sooner than they appear in the public school system. I think it's the lack of criteria that sends freshmen into the colleges illiterate, that makes freshman English a 7th-grade English course, because they've been encouraged to express themselves, and what I would worry about is the balance of keeping the expression going, but imposing some limitations, and I find myself thinking, supposing this 5th-grade exercise were in how to play the piano. What did Kenneth Koch do about this? Could you be that permissive? That is, to encourage everything the fingers did on the keyboard, whether they had learned how to do it or not, or would you not be more demanding at the same time that you're encouraging? My limited experience of the public school system has been that there's too little demand and too much encouragement.

Williams:

I would like to move out a little bit from that, I think, support what John has said, and, I guess, take some issue with what you said, Michael. I enjoy a lot of the wildest associational poetry and some of my more interesting failures have been that, some of my more gratifying losses, but I think to be concerned about the fact that what we call form prevents students from saying what they want to say is to be concerned that the track keeps the train from going where it wants to go.

Browne:

Right, rhyme, not form.

Williams:

Well, rhyme is a part of external form, I think. The language of good poetry has to echo itself, and rhyme is simply one of the ways in which it does it. I like a lot of good poetry with no discernible rhyme, but I think to throw out anything that was done in the past and say, "That's out now," seems to me not to accumulate our techniques as we go along.

Browne:

No, I wasn't saying that, and I said that when rhyme occurs spontaneously, it's fine; it's just that the way that poetry is going, rhyme's place is less dominant, and the intimidation of rhyme can be tremendous on a child who's struggling to open his mind up.

Williams:

It's the spontaneous that bothers me. I just can't believe, when I read Yeats, that those lovely moments I find occured spontaneously. He didn't indicate that they did.

Browne:

We're talking about teaching young children, and that's exactly an example of intimidating a child with the example of Yeats, that's exactly what's the problem, as I say.

Ciardi:

No, but is every effort to impose a discipline an intimidation, this is the question I'm asking. I don't have an answer to it, but I'm worried about the balance of "yes" to keep up the energy, but "no" to put in some strictures.

Browne:
I think every time I've answered a question, I find myself saying, "Yes, but where did it come in the progress of the life of the writer?" We're talking about beginnings and, back to Koch, he's dealing with 5th grade, not college level, and I think the beginning process of teaching writing is to start letting the material out that they didn't know was there, and later the criteria can come; and I think they should come, perhaps, later rather than sooner.

Ciardi:
Well, why not, then, say the school needs some cheers. Why don't you write a good cheer for our team and make it rhyme, because cheers should rhyme? They don't work unless they do rhyme. Not everybody would come up with a good one, but why wouldn't that be a game with some strictures, instead of "Tell me what's going on in your fuzzy little psyche this morning and be ecstatic about it"?

Browne:
Yes, that's a good debating point; but supposing the child has something in his head that he really needs to talk about, writing a rhyme about a cheer won't handle things that he needs to write about.

Ciardi:
I still think if you get him excited—I'm still excited about what my kids brought home from junior high school, I don't know where it came from, but the cheer began, "California oranges, Texas cactus, we think your team needs a little practice." I don't see how they could fail to say, "Hey, that's fun," and get excited about it, and want to see if they couldn't do something like it, instead of just letting it spill.

Browne:
Well, again, it's a part of it, it's a good part, but it's not all of it.

Engle:
There's a question here on the right. Can a microphone be brought?

Audience:
How right you are. I'd like to interpose something here, if I may,

concerning rhyme and rhythm in poetry or form. It constantly amazes me to see how it is derogated today. I simply might suggest that probably the most widespread and well-known poetry—simple, but not so simple when it was written—are the Mother Goose rhymes. They have lived, when there weren't publishers and creative writing classes and other classes, as simply, although some of the thought, if any of you have made a study of Mother Goose rhymes, has been political, some of it very adult, but they have actually lived because of their catchy rhythm and their rhyme, since such rhyme and rhythm, I am sure that you will agree, is inherent in children. One doesn't require them to be disciplined, to think things in rhyme. If you listen to them in the playground, or hear them, you will hear "One, two, buckle my shoe." You will also hear, which are, I think, three centuries old, the old counting out rhymes on the playground to decide who is it. So that I must say, in my own experience (I happen to be a poet and I write historical fiction), I am constantly amazed at the derogation of form and rhythm when our world is rhythm, we live by it, we walk to rhythm, we speak to rhythm, our songs, our prayers, everything is rhythm, and the rhyme will come naturally. I don't think things are spontaneous because they're hurled forth in huge jerks unpolished and unrhythmic. Thank you for listening.

Engle:

May I make a comment on that. I would like to feel that the distinction you made in your last sentence between the polished rhymed and rhythmical form and the material that comes out in huge jerks is not the question. The question, I think, is, in Michael Dennis Browne's mind, not the unformed poem, because, having read his poetry, I know he completely agrees that poetry should be formed, shaped, rhythmical. Rhyme may not always be necessary. It has a marvelous point, as in the Mother Goose poems, which essentially are, you know, political satires, and for which you need rhyme, and rhyme heightens, indeed, like the famous old English poem, "Here lie the bones of poor Mrs. Gurney/ who fell from the train and broke her journey." Rhyme is wonderful at certain moments, but I don't think it's indispensable always; now I think that's what we're dealing with here. I think to impose rhyme on little 5th-grade children might be a little hard for them, to create themselves while enjoying it.

Does anyone else want to comment on that particular matter? There is a question here.

Audience:

This is a marketplace question primarily addressed to John Ciardi.

Your student is gifted; he's honed his craft. The question I'm asking is, then what? I'm thinking of Stegner's comment this morning about writing being a barely existent profession. It echoes something that Swados wrote in his last *New York Times Book Review* piece. It echoes the sentiment of an editor at Lippincott, who says that poetry doesn't sell, and that of the editor of *December* magazine, who says that perhaps one out of 10 people who should be making it do. Writing is not yet a respectable profession. We would laugh if people practiced medicine as a hobby. Once you've gotten that student to the kind of encouragement and technique you've been speaking about, who is gifted to begin with, to write better, then what? In other words, beyond the little magazines, beyond the *Saturday Review* and a few slicks, what do we do with it?

Ciardi:

Well, it's a serious question. It's true that when I was beginning to write, there were far more places to publish than there are now. That is, nationally. The little reviews are going to have to carry it all, bit by bit. Where is there left, the *Saturday*—I'm no longer with the *Saturday Review,* I'm with *World* magazine, but *World* has no poetry editor. It is not publishing poetry, despite the misimpression you might get by looking at some of Buckminster Fuller's essays, that look as if they might have been poetry except that they're not. They're just handsomely printed. The *New Yorker* and the *Atlantic,* I guess, are the last two national magazines doing anything substantial with poetry. *Harper's* is accepting no unsolicited manuscript. Marcia Masters is doing a page in a Chicago newspaper. But years ago there were 40 such outlets, and now they're down to almost nothing, which says that poets are going to have to publish in little magazines. That's not a happy condition. I'm describing the world without necessarily endorsing it.

Engle:

May I comment, apropos that, it was earlier mentioned that here we are turning out young writers with very little place for them to publish. I would like to interject a note of gloom and despair into this otherwise cheerful discussion. We are the only country, to my knowledge in the history of the world, which alleges that it is trying to create a literature without a national literary magazine. We don't have one. Poor socialist countries of East Europe have national literary magazines, national literary newspapers, and in all of their languages. Romania has five, in five languages, and they've got 20 million people and a tiny economy. And it seems to me that we are in a rather foolish position, if we just go on turning out writers. We must turn out places for them to print, and I should like to argue that it ought to be the responsibility of our cultural organizations to make a magazine. At last, there should be an American literary magazine. Do you think it's impossible, John?

Ciardi:

We hereby direct the Library of Congress to start one.

Jacobsen:

Thank you, John.

Engle:

And they should pay embarrassingly well.

Jacobsen:

I will pass that on.

Coleman:

That goes into the new budget we've just heard about.

Engle:

The budget of the government of the United States with its cultural leader?

Audience:

I think the biggest danger of what I've been listening to so far is the cubby-hole that we're going to drive ourselves into, if we get into discussions of such things as rhyme and formal questions, you know, because the English language, maybe, has its own rhythmic history. We don't speak English anymore, we speak American, for whatever that is, we do. Rhyme is not one of its best possibilities, and I think we can drop that right away. I think what we do have to pay close attention to is the formal dimension of the language which we speak, and we have to get the expression which comes directly out of those formal dimensions, and if we start talking about rhyme, the kids aren't going to sit still for it. I have taught poetry in the schools in several states now. The first question the kids ask me in the most pleading voice is, "Do we have to rhyme?" You know, they want to talk, and I think you ask a question about whether or not we should put some sort of hold on them, getting the words out of the head is the first hold, and I think the second problem that we face is starting. We don't have an audience, and you talk about magazines. Well, the reason we don't have any magazines is because there aren't any readers anyways. And one thing should be done by every creative writing course is at least, if they're no good at writing, we should turn out an audience.

Ciardi:

I have to speak to that very urgently, I feel very strongly about it. I think you have been discussing therapy. I am not at all against therapy, but the assertion that rhyme has nothing to do with the English language is one I simply reject—or American language. Remember you're talking to kids who hardly speak their own language, who have never been exposed to one of the ancestral languages that make English work, who have to have translations if they read Shakespeare. And what we're doing is deifying ignorance in the use of language because it's common. Now, I don't think there is anything —poetry is not going to be written by people who speak the language of the streets. This has been—just a minute, just a minute, I haven't finished my statement. This point has been entered by better men than I, I'm simply going to quote them. Dante in "De Vulgare Eloquentia," his "Treatise on the Public Tongue," and Arnold in what he said about the essay on translation was speaking simply this. What is "de vulgare eloquentia"? Dante spoke of the language of the court—he might have put it another way—not the language of the street, but what the man on the street would speak if every man on the street cared about the language in his mouth. That's the distinction we have to hold on to.

Audience:

Well, I think you make a lot of assumptions in there that aren't necessarily true, one of them being, of course. that the poetry of the streets hasn't got that potential in American. I mean what I'm really saying to you is Americans are the best poets now, you know, and being the best poets in the world, I think they should stop bowing to Europe.

Ciardi:

That's a ridiculous statement. . . .

Audience:

I don't want to get into any chauvinism at all, but what has developed in America, what has developed in the course of American poetry has always been a bending towards Europe, and it's time that that bending towards Europe stopped. I'm not talking about ignorance. Nobody ever said ignorance. I think you have to have a full knowledge of the full body of the work, but I think that you have to begin at a primary knowledge of the language that we speak with, and it doesn't include imposing other formal solutions to other rhythmic possibilities from other languages. That's all.

Engle:

Mr. McNeill wants to address himself to this topic.

McNeill:

Yes, I argue that the environment affects language in a very vital way. For example, when I started to write—I suppose most people who start to write, having been taught at school Shakespeare and the English Romantic poets, and learning to like poetry through them, because I'd read nothing else, and obviously they are great poets—it hit me, after I was writing for a few years, especially after I started to read contemporary or modern poetry—in fact, Mr. Ciardi was one of my favorite poets for quite some time, and, well, I even got an autograph from him at a little school called Nassau Community College, which I still have—like most apprentice poets, it hit me at some point that I was writing in, you know, somebody else's voice and style. In one case, Mr. Ciardi's. But, when the thing actually got down on the page, I realized—I mean, probably not then, but at least in retrospect—that all of the rhetorical fluency, etc., came out, you know, when I got my own thing down, it came out in a more staccato and fragmentary way, and I argue that the fragmentary or staccato quality, which has increased in my own poetry, is the inevitable result of being in an environment where jukeboxes shout out rhythms which are more African than European in quality, and that the language cannot help but be affected, so that, for me, English, even though I write in English, is almost a strange language. That doesn't mean that I shouldn't write good English. The great masters of English in this century have not been Englishmen, but I argue that the language of Joyce and Beckett is idiosyncratic and that an Englishman would never write like that. You know, the language is, in the case of a lot of Joyce, more staccato, etc. I don't know if I've really been talking, you know, but I think basically I'm agreeing with what you said, in a roundabout way.

Engle:

Do you have a microphone there? Yes, please.

Audience:

Paul, it seems to me that one thing can be said right away that's going to be helpful, and that's to use tape recorders with children. That's one of the things a writer can do in attempting to find his own voice, and I tried that as an experiment in one writing program, bought a couple of very, very good tape recorders and gave microphones to the students, and they learned to find their own voice much faster than they did when they were writing it, scribbling it down and trying to make it come out to be one typewriter page long. There have been enough poems in English written to the size of a typewriter page. Tape is a marvelous thing. Alan Austin is here today, and he edits a tape cassette poetry magazine, and I think people should start thinking about videotape, its marvelous feedback. It's about time maybe poetry got up off the page. I know this is talking about creative writing but poems can be sung, you know, and stories can be told, and we have the technology now, and this seems a little medieval this afternoon, to me.

Momaday:

On this point, if I may say something. I have been interested for a long time in, and actively engaged in, working with American Indian oral tradition, and it is possible to talk about such things as rhythm and form without talking about writing, certainly, and there is a great deal to be done in approaching, I think, poetry, even before you come to a consideration of writing. Writing has a history of about 6,000 years. More than half the population of the world at this moment in time does without writing, and poetry, at least the poetic experience, and the values which most closely inform poetry, are in a way transcendent of writing. But I think some of the most important and exciting work that can be done with children, to get back to the business of teaching in the lower grades for a moment, has to do with what you're suggesting: the quality of sound—the aural and oral, experience—as opposed to writing, as a starting point, perhaps.

Audience:

It seems to me that we've been talking about so many points of departure, and that all of them are equally valid; tradition and lack of tradition, form and lack of form, and this is what makes American poetry so very exciting. But the question that has been lingering in my mind, as an undercurrent to all of this, happened because of Mrs. Jacobsen's comments that poetry is the noblest of arts, and I've wondered why. Also, tying in with Mr. Engle's talk about the various countries with a national magazine, why we don't have more respect for poets in our country, and why there are not occasional poems written for ceremonious purposes such as in England and elsewhere. We have James Dickey writing for *Life* a series of poems of man on the moon and so forth, but why has this not become something that is recognized? I don't remember a poet getting a special place to give his poem on an occasion other than Mr. Frost at the Kennedy inauguration. I had great hopes from there, and I'm wondering where things have gone since then with the poet and his reputation in America.

Engle:

Josephine Jacobsen would like to comment on that question.

Jacobsen:

Yes, I think one of the problems that you have in this area is that you are really getting into the poet-laureateship thing, and I think that does have such tremendous built-in occupational hazards. I think it would be marvelous if poets were genuinely, spontaneously inspired on epic themes; I agree with you, this would be marvelous. But the minute that you get into a situation where you even seem, psychologically, to require of the poet that he celebrate something, I think you get into the kind of thing that has made the poet laureateship in England have its own difficulties, and here I'm speaking more or less timidly. It seems to me that you do have a rather dangerous premise when you feel that the poet, as a member of the community, should celebrate events. I think there has been a sort of denigration of big poetry of this kind. I think it would be wonderful if we had poets who rose to tremendous subjects, but I'm awfully leery of the poet committed to celebrate occasions. I don't know about the rest of you.

Ciardi:

Even when they're not official; one of the hazards of having James Dickey celebrate the landing on the moon is what he wrote to celebrate it. Now, I have the highest respect for him as a poet, he's a wonderful madman, all of his nerve-ends are open to language, but that is not the best he ever did, by much.

Engle:

I would like to comment, if I may, about what Josephine just said. Why is it considered proper to commission, for example, when he was alive, Stravinsky? Why, somehow, is it assumed that a poet would do badly, but a musician would do well? Artists, sculptors, are commissioned for public buildings. Chicago rejoices in a Picasso figure; half of Chicago thinks it's a woman, half thinks it's a horse. Personally, I think it's a mare. And why not let the poet do his thing? He's not necessarily going to describe the event, any more than Stravinsky wrote patterned music for the occasion. I resent very much the fact that the poet is never commissioned. I think he should be commissioned in the way a composer is commissioned to do his best thing, and it's called for an occasion, but it's not a history of the occasion.

Jacobsen:
But, Paul, don't you run then into the proposition that he is more answerable, that some power-that-be isn't going to like what he said and is going to make this clear?

Ciardi:
There are no four-letter notes.

Jacobsen:
Right, this is what I mean. Isn't that maybe the problem?

Engle:
Have you ever heard a trombone flat? There are several questions back there behind.

Audience:
There is one practical question which I'd like to mention at this point, because it ties in with a great many of the points which have been made about publication, about the oral versus the written, about a national framework, and so on. When I arrived in this country about three years ago, I found that there was a very flourishing poetry-reading situation in these states which has many functions. It got poets more money than publication, it knitted poets together. They could travel across the land, see each other, pick up the news, stay in each other's houses. Also, of course, needless to say, it got the poets' work to audiences in ways very often more efficient than the printed page did. On the principle of killing canary budgets before eagle budgets, the budgets for poetry reading work in the states have been drastically cut recently, and very few of these have survived. The offers that come in now are almost insulting to poets, except for a few stars—and the star system, of course, would always survive in any case—but for the large majority of people, the situation has become almost impossible, and I wonder whether programs of creative writing and departments of creative writing should now address themselves to this.

Engle:
Does anyone want to make a reply? Because if you don't, I will. Yes, there's someone there.

Audience:

You asked before how it is that Stravinsky is commissioned to write music, and why it's performed, and all that sort of thing, and assume that there is some relative relationship between that and poetry. There is a great deal, from the poet's point of view. That is, you may both be sweet singers, and make music, but there is an established orchestra business; there are established subscriptions to orchestras; there are listeners. The thing that most charmed me in this talk about the elementary school children, and whatever it is you're doing with them about poetry, the Lord knows that most of them will never learn the English language or the American language in all their lives, but you are doing something that makes them responsive to the oral side of poetry, the rhythm, the sound, the kind of thing that makes it possible for us to enjoy listening to French poetry being well read, although we don't understand French or Italian poetry well read—although we don't understand Italian—and enables foreigners to enjoy the sounds of Shakespeare, although they don't understand English.

You have to have an audience, and you have to have an economic structure which will provide the channels for payment for this kind of thing. Now, I must say that this decrying the plight of the artist, poet, in his garret, who may not be able to be published, is as old as humanity is old, and the singing of songs is old, and I think will always be so. If you devote yourself to the arts, you have a commitment to give of yourself; if accidentally, you make a livelihood out of it, so much the better, but you can hardly expect a society of the kind of people that most of the world's population are to provide for this as a necessity. This is a utopian kind of thing, and on the subject of utopias, the United States, it seems to me, is not so far behind the rest of the world in the comforts and opportunities and conveniences it does provide through fellowships and grants and institutions, and I think we decry it altogether too much. It's something to enjoy, it's something to devote yourself to, it's something to pass along to others, the love of it, if you can. Let them try their hand at it, but there are going to be a hell of a lot of losers in this business, not only in their wrestles with the word and the sound, but in the business of trying to make a living out of it, obviously, no matter how generous our communities may be.

Engle:

Up on the left, there is someone very eager to speak.

Audience:

Yes, I guess I am, because I think the difficulty, if it's solved by anybody, is going to have to be solved by us. You mentioned a while ago commissioning poets to write. I can think of some very good poems that were written on commission. Some years ago, for an example, the Phi Beta Kappa Society at the University of Missouri commissioned W. D. Snodgrass to write a poem. He shocked them by writing a very good poem called "The Examination." Similarly, I think most of us belong to some organization that could commission this kind of poetry. Most of us have access to some funds that we could use to bring a poet on our campus; if not someone of national reputation, some local poet. I live fairly close to St. Louis, Mo.; there are a dozen good poets in that city, extremely good poets, and they can be had for something less than most of us spent to come here to this conference.

Engle:

At the back, opposite him, there is a hand needing a microphone.

Audience:

I would just like to speak out against a national literary magazine because it's possible that the editors would probably have the arrogance and snobbishness of the editors or panelists today.

Ciardi:

Every magazine is subject to the arrogance of its editors.

Audience:

Mother Goose is a sweet old soul, but her hips don't roll, which is to say that perhaps part of the problem with poetry in America today is that it has not created an audience. If you're speaking to yourself, only yourself will listen. It may be that the real poet of America is on the billboards, and in the commercials. But we were talking about magazines, etc. I'd like—I'm not in this, so it can't be very good—but outside, for free, for those who'd like to pick it up, is the *American Poetry Review*, which is a venture by some people to provide that forum which you've been talking about. I think that there are many good poets in the country today. Very many, and that we should not perhaps be upset because of the fact that we are not all listened to. I think we should also remember what country we are living in, and what kind of intellectual literary traditions we have, where our most well-known American poet is Rod McKuen. And I'll just stop at that.

Ciardi:

I think there's a problem in that. I'd like to say a word to it. Why does one write? Is it necessarily for the largest possible audience?

Certainly, many poets I know, and sometimes I practice this, are deliberately limiting their audience by using more of the language, or trying to use more of the language than the general audience will respond to. For example, if Rod McKuen sells a million copies, I can identify a million people who would not want to read my poems. And I don't want to write to them. I don't know why the idea of a large circulation is the important one. Milton had another. He said, "Fit audience, though few."

A man is wrestling with his particular ghosts when he writes. Publication and circulation are something that comes long after that, if it happens at all. The thing is to have a language encounter that makes real, and the thing about good poetry, it seems to me, is that every good poem is different, no one form excludes another. What we have to recognize is that there are so few ways in which a poem can be bad, but they're all familiar. I haven't seen a new kind of bad poem for 30 years. If someone gave me a new kind of bad poem, say when I was still editing some, if I had found a new kind of bad poem, I would have grabbed it, I would have wanted to write a book about it: look, here's a whole new way of being bad. But all bad poems sound like one another, and I think that's part of the subject for us to discuss, to make visible to those who want to write, the habituated commonness of their badness; then, when they get into something you haven't categorized yet, they may be beginning to form themselves.

Engle:

Those of you eligible for Mr. Ciardi's category may submit your poems anonymously. This room is probably loaded.

Ciardi:

I will even read them anonymously.

Audience:

I'd like to address this question to Mr. Ciardi, but it certainly doesn't rule out anybody else chipping in. Some time ago, Mr. Ciardi, you addressed Goucher College in a delightful way, and you spoke about the difficulties of rhyming and getting caught on the hook of a bad rhyme and so forth, and you also spoke about this very difficult-to-find quality of the ghost of an undertone, which you commented on at some length. Let me ask a specific, if I may. Have you found in the course of your teaching experience in poetry writing, an increasing reluctance on your part to discuss this ghost of an undertone when you found it developing? There was, after all, the student's reaction that this is good as it is, and you'll crucify it by an analysis and so on, let it stay as it is because it's so pristine and lovely; or have you remained to this day one who wants to address himself to something exciting, because it is fresh and has somehow turned around the light in a new kind of way?

Ciardi:

Well, I'm not sure I entirely understand the question, but it seems to me only my very good students in the past wrote poems that did generate overtones that connected with one another. They were the reasons for teaching. One of the reasons I quit is that I ran into a drought, and I haven't taught for 12 years. This last month has been my first experience at it for a while. It's just a nostalgic revisit, in a sense. The good ones did develop overtones. That gave you something very special to work with. But I ran into a drought in which, for four years running, I didn't have any student who seemed to me to be worth the time he was taking up, his and mine. And that gets to be an end of rewards. Several of the people that I made contact with when I was on the faculty, when they were undergraduates, have gone on to do very good things. But it was so obvious, instantly, that these were the people who had it, their language vibrated, it had the ghosts. They were not pretentious, they were not writing an artificial language, they were using all of the language. Frank O'Hara was one of my students at Harvard, and when he put words together, they connected. I could talk to him about things that I could not even mention to the rest of the class, he was responding. And there have been several such. That's the luck of teaching, when you catch one, when you know a really good violinist makes one violin sound like three when he's playing, things get to vibrating. And you can talk to him about things you could not talk about to the man who squeaks and squaws valiantly, but doesn't have that extra vibe.

Engle:

Some time ago, a person in red here was wanting to talk.

Audience:

I guess what I have to say relates to what the man said back there about arrogance and so on. I just, I suppose, would like to add more to that, because I just don't feel it should be left. I came late to the creative writing classroom at Iowa. I went when I was about 25, after I was in the service and some other places. I suppose that's not too late, but—I was discouraged, I guess, all through grammar school and high school, and told that I didn't speak that well, and that I didn't write very well, and I was discouraged by people I met who were kind of intellectual and so on, by their arrogance and their ability to make judgments, snap judgments immediately about all kinds of things that I hadn't even thought about, and in the presence of those people I would be afraid to speak and to say anything, or to make a judgment, and I'd assume that there's no sense in my reading this, because I wouldn't even understand this kind of thing. When you made the statement about students not reading, the way you made it, it seemed to me as if I were still in the shoes I was in several years ago, and even to some extent now. It almost made me feel like, you know, I haven't read either, I don't want to read, even, you know, because of the way it was stated, it's a real problem there. I mean there is the problem of creating an audience, who that audience is, and who you want to respond to your work, to your poems. It seems to me that just immediately assuming that you are the proper representative of the audience for this particular person's poetry is a mistake and raises a question that we have to deal with. Black poets proved it in the sixties. A good friend of mine, whom some of you have probably read, Etheridge Knight, his books sell fantastically well, and I've been with him in various parts of the country where he can walk in and get a reading going in a matter of three hours and have a very large audience of people that most of you possibly wouldn't want in your classrooms, and wouldn't want to be talking to, and so on. And he's, I think, a peg above Rod McKuen. Women poets, there's a woman poet named Alta whom most of the women I know, at least when I go around and give readings or talk to people, are familiar with. Probably most of you have never read her, so maybe you're not so well-read in some areas, too.

There's lots of possibilities for poetry. I hate to see this kind of competitiveness and everybody leaving this hall with some people just saying, "Well, they're arrogant bastards," and the other people saying, "Well, they're ill-read, don't know anything," you know. I think there's a lot of room to get at the humanness that poetry quite often gets at anyway. The thing that made me respond to poetry and want to be interested, despite all these people telling me I'd better forget it—and maybe they were right, I don't know—but I'm into poetry now, and I dig it, despite the kinds of things I've been exposed to, like some of the things that have been said on this panel. I don't know if I articulated that very well, but that's all.

Audience:

You don't dig poetry without reading it, do you?

Audience:

That's true, but it wasn't until it was presented to me in a way that was accessible to me from where I was coming from.

Ciardi:

Acceptable to you; now that is the measure, to you, that's the thing. I have sat in on some of these, what do you want to call them, subculture readings? I have been bored by them, as a matter of personal choice. I'm not legislating, and what I miss most in those voices is the reading they have not done, which is immediately visible in the way the poem is put together. I think there's an illiteracy of the medium. Now, poetry has always substituted passion for information, that's why we don't write nonfiction; but nevertheless, it seems to me that no one is going to write music unless he has listened to music, and the first thing you hear is the absence of the listening when you get a bad performance.

I think that what we mean by audience has two things to consider. The first place, every man for his own measure. I'm not legislating anyone else's, but I'm going to hold onto mine, because I'm stubborn and ornery, and I'm not going to live long enough for it to make any difference to anybody else, but it matters to me. I think a man, in the course of his life, develops an idea of excellence. It's compounded of all those he has admired, of the things he has tried to do. Maybe he can't quite identify it. Now, if one person or 10,000 enter into it, or 10 million, it makes no difference. If it's truly written, it's going to be written to one's own evolved sense of excellence, which will shift from time to time. Now, you may fail; if you mean it hard enough, you have to fail, but that's the direction to fail in. The other thing is, I think we're corrupted by mass media. We speak of the audience as if you could put it together. Where is the audience for Homer? Generations of it have long since been dead, and generations of it are yet unborn, so there is a horizontal audience and a vertical audience. One continues through time, it is longer than any one person's life, and that is the tradition we have in mind when we speak of the humanities. The people who are plumping for the horizontal audience seem to act as if this tradition did not exist. I want to make this point, that if we measure not in terms of the Gallup poll, but, say, in terms of Judgment Day, by Judgment Day, more people will have read John Keats than will have read all the combined issues of *Life* magazine. That is part of the human tradition.

Audience:

My question is approximately what period of time must elapse before it can be determined whether a poet's works are durable, or will live? In other words, before it's determined whether he really was a poet?

Engle:

It is the considered judgment of this entire panel that we do not know, and the reason is—it is a sensible question—that it is so complicated. Sometimes you know immediately "that's a permanent poem," and sometimes you praise a work which turns out to be trash. Another generation will be smarter. Now, we have time only for one more question. Who has the microphone? That lady in white had her arm up a long time ago, and so did the one in red, in that row. Do you want to talk or not? Why not? It's an honor. Besides, everyone would be so grateful.

Audience:

I hope this isn't too unrelated, but I am very curious to know your reaction to the possibility of teaching, say, Longinus and the common; the esthetic writings of Coleridge while teaching poetry writing. Many students are afraid of it, they think they get into abstractions, and it seems to me that it should not be so, that they should relate it to a very physical sense of a poem, and develop their own esthetic while developing their own poems. Do you have any reaction?

Browne:

I missed the first part of the question, doing something while teaching poetry writing. I didn't hear what you said. Sorry.

Audience:

Relating the writings, say, of Longinus on the sublime, to the writing of your poem.

Ciardi:

At what level?

Audience:

Rather advanced, to be sure, but nevertheless, in a college, not a graduate school.

Engle:

It is the considered judgment of this panel that we agree with everything you say. Yes, why not relate it, but it is not always relevant to relate it. You know, I think, mix it all up. Some people are paralyzed by Longinus on the sublime. Let it go if they are. You know, the problem about teaching creative writing was mentioned awhile back. The risk is that it should be institutionalized, and to relate Longinus to any poem, contemporary or classical, is a part of this institutionalization, and that's a real problem for creative writing. We've gone a little far from considering the problem, but I think we haven't sufficiently discussed the terrible and frightening issues here in teaching creative writing. You're dealing with nervous systems, and the imagination, and you're not dealing with measurable things, and I think the universities had a right to be scared. Now, I wish they'd get a little more scared than they are. Now they're all hiring people, not all of whom, really, are qualified to do what they're asked to do. I hear a great deal of mumbling when I listen to creative writing teachers sometimes. Yes, could you give her a microphone, please? You spoke once before, didn't you? Oh, good. I'm seeing red.

Audience:

I'd like to address my comments a little bit to the person in red behind me. I've only been teaching for 18 months, and I teach undergraduates in a structured university, and adults in a free school, and I have found that overwhelmingly my problems with my students are that they devalue themselves. They don't think that what they have to say is important or serious. Consequently, I am against this kind of exposure to the famous people, the traditional forms, as an excruciating initiation rite. On the other hand, this is not to say that they shouldn't read other poems, that they shouldn't steal from them, that they shouldn't be comforted by them, but I think the most important thing that a teacher of creative writing can do is to make the students understand, and be awed by, the power impacted in the language, and to give the students the confidence and the competence to use this power of the language. This necessarily involves restrictions and discipline and discrimination, but not anything arbitrary or arrogant.

Engle.

This panel is unanimously against arrogance. We have five minutes, and the question is, how can we best utilize it?

Ciardi:

Adjourn.

Engle:

Shall we adjourn?

NOTES

[1] Ezra Pound, *Selected Poems*, ed. T. S. Eliot (London: Faber & Gwyer, 1928), p. xxi.

[2] From "For Wolf Graf von Kalckreuth," in Rainer Maria Rilke, *Requiem and Other Poems*, tr. J. B. Leishman (London: Leonard & Virginia Woolf, 1935), pp. 107-08.

[3] The final version from *Collected Poems* by William Butler Yeats (New York: Macmillan and Co., 1956), p. 40. Copyright 1906 by Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., renewed 1934 by Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc. Used by permission. The earlier version appeared in *The Countess Kathleen and Various Legends and Lyrics* by W. B. Yeats (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1892), p. 115.

The Writing of Fiction

Wallace Stegner, chairman; John Barth, Ralph Ellison, Ernest J. Gaines, George Garrett, Robie Macauley, Margaret Walker

Wallace Stegner:

This symposium on the teaching of fiction is going to borrow a little bit from the first symposium and a little bit from the second on the teaching of poetry, that is to say some of the panel would like to make a few remarks in advance, some would rather respond to questions, so that after I get through making my introductory remarks, Mr. Barth, Mr. Macauley, and Miss Walker will make some remarks, and after that the panel will be open to responses and questions from the floor. I have an announcement there about a new magazine, which I think I will save, if somebody will remind me to bring it in before the meeting closes.

About the teaching of creative writing I take certain truths to be self-evident: 1) It can be done. 2) It can't be done to everybody. 3) It becomes progressively harder to do the farther you get from fundamentals. 4) It becomes progressively harder in times of cultural and moral and esthetic revolution. 5) College classes are by no means the only way it can be done, but considering American geography, history, and institutions, they are a logical and legitimate way.

Add to those certain corollary truths that seem to me equally self-evident: 1) Bringing the training ground of literature onto the campus has not necessarily improved the literature. 2) Whether we like it or not, that is where it is—most contemporary fiction and poetry have come out of it. And, 3) college classes in writing are often badly taught—that is to say, overtaught or undertaught.

Let us not waste time on the old condescending question about whether you can *really* teach writing. Nobody asks that question about painting or architecture or music. Nobody questions the usefulness of the neighborhood piano teacher, or of a year under Schnabel or

Casadesus or Nadia Boulanger. Nobody looks down his nose at the Art Students' League or the Juilliard.

Fiction is a complex art, with an intellectual, philosophical, sociological, psychological, ethical, and moral content far more explicit than the hints and suggestions possible through other media, and it evokes its effects not directly, through sounds and images and colors, but through the difficult symbolic system of words. But because words are to some extent the possession of everyone, even the village idiot, and because storytelling is a natural human expression, even the village idiot sometimes aspires to write. An ignorant folklore, combined with human wishfulness and the rumor of literary jackpots, may lead someone with a vocabulary of 200 words and a sensibility like that of *homo horribilis* to slouch toward the typewriter to be born. And some residual American faith in education may whisper to him that if he answers that ad, attends that writers' conference, takes those four units by extension, he may find himself disencumbered from his horns and fangs and revealed as the prince he is.

That is, there is a confusion of beliefs. Writing can be self-taught or talent simply revealed; writing is dependent on genius and cannot be taught at all—*shouldn't* be taught; writing is learnable by any intelligent person, upon payment of a small fee.

None of those faiths is more than minimally true. Every literate individual and many an illiterate as well learns something about the art of storytelling simply by growing up in a culture. He will learn by absorption and imitation the forms that his culture has developed. In a thoroughly traditional society such as that of the Zuñi, not only the content and form but even the stresses and emphases and pauses are learned by imitation. In our own society, so eclectic as to be nearly experimental, writing may be taught—some kind of writing—to anyone with a gift; but you do not, as Ring Lardner said, make a writer out of a born druggist, and there are many people with a considerable gift to whom you can teach hardly anything. Finally, there are times in history, and this is one, when all tradition and all authority seem so inadequate and are so much under attack that neither the body of lore the teacher brings to class, nor the teacher himself, enforces much respect. That goes even when the teacher is a writer of considerable reputation, and it goes double if he is inclined to be traditional. Casadesus, who he? Plays those little Mozart things.

Beginners are the easiest. Everything a teacher has to tell them about scene and summary, showing and telling, action and implication, tone and style, character and story structure, is new and exciting, a solid body of technique and convention always half-known but never fully understood, a set of tools that they now learn to use. But after a year or so those same students may be all but unteachable. They find answers very fast, often before they have discovered the questions. They catch the innovationism that lurks in the air like germs of children's diseases, they write for themselves or their coterie, they embrace private languages, they grow exceedingly clever, and they smile at the hidebound teacher, whom they have left far behind, for his quaint prejudices and old-fashioned judgments. Mutants, and proud of it because they know that they embody the entire genetics of change, they do not listen very hard to the species-wisdom which reminds them that most mutants are monsters, and cannot survive.

Those are the "literary" ones. The situation is more complex among young writers whose motivation is ethnic and political, who are fighting their way out from under traditions which to them have been foreign and oppressive and are looking for their own ways, new affirmations, forms, even languages, within our multiple culture. Black English is a case in point. How do I, white and 63, *teach* anything to a black writer of 23 who wants, legitimately, to speak from within the black experience and in the black tone of voice? Do I even try? If I attempt to tailor him to the tradition I know, I may do him real harm. If I try to "correct" his language into standard English I may cripple him—and I know that I am never going to correct him into importance, in any case. The importance he achieves will be his own doing. Maybe I can't teach him; maybe I can only encourage him. Because he is young, gifted, and coming up from below with a big head of steam, he is certain to be headstrong. I may think it will do him good to read Samuel Richardson, but if he thinks otherwise I am not going to make him. At the same time, I may regret his influence upon others in the group whose rebellions are less authentic, those for whom unteachability is mainly a declaration of laziness, ignorance, and irresponsibility.

I have said that college writing courses are often badly taught. I hasten to add that they are just as often badly *taken*. You can teach only those willing to learn. Faced with the dilemmas of a most difficult kind of pedagogy, the teacher has only a few choices.

1) He can be authoritarian—he can break these colts with a two-by-four, the way I have seen Wyoming cowpunchers do it. He can drill them in the traditional forms as he might drill them in Greek verbs. He will drive out the lazy and alienate the independent, but he may make a few writers, always in his own image, and he will have the total devotion of those who have chosen him as father. There are not many of this kind around—the times are wrong for him.

2) He can, if he is himself a rebel and innovator, so influence the malleable members of a group that they become an orthodoxy of the heretical, a little embattled bunch rallying around the true ark of the covenant. He too drives away the minds he cannot dominate. His disciples are as like him as nickels are like a silver dollar. He is the Lucifer figure, which is more commonly seen than the Jehovah figure in times which, like these, are essentially romantic.

3) He can abdicate as teacher and become a mere evocator, smiling in the midst of chaos. He truly believes that chaos is the order destroyed during creation, that creation is necessarily destructive or anarchic. In his class all is permitted, anything goes. Its meetings are societies for mutual admiration and appreciation, his classroom is a temple of the impromptu. He does not instruct, he permits. This teacher is a policeman who will not try to impose law and order for fear of bringing on revolution. He believes that the alternative to being a 100-proof Procrustes is to be a 3.2 Socrates. Instead of breaking colts with a two-by-four, he spends his time feeding them sugar and apples, scratching their polls, and getting out of the way when they threaten to run over him. The horses he trains, if that is the word, will be head-shy, corral-balky, skittish, and easily spooked, and will not stand to be mounted. They are great for eating hay, or sugar, but you could never hitch them to the rake. If any of them turn out well, and they sometimes do, they do it by themselves. They cannot be said to have been taught. This kind of nonteacher, this indulgent fellow-traveler, is the commonest kind of writing teacher.

4) He can choose *really* to teach, not indoctrinate and not indulge. If he is charged with schooling a colt, he knows he is going to have to inhibit the colt's self-expression to some extent. He doesn't give a damn about the colt's self-expression: that's the colt's lookout. But he doesn't break him with a two-by-four either. He schools him to accept halter, blanket, bridle, saddle, until he carries them without thinking about them. He takes him into the ring and he lets him run—with a rope on him. He keeps him in control, he prevents his running through the fences, he schools him in carrying a rider, jumping, whatever his native gifts and conformation design him for. The colt will never grow up to be Wildfire, living an Errol Flynn fantasy as a wild range stallion, but he may be something better: a schooled and civilized horse which can do a hundred things Wildfire couldn't begin to do and who doesn't suffer from Wildfire's bots and warbles, either.

James Joyce, who was entitled to his opinion, suggested that a civilization is made by its outlaws. Certainly it is not made by its policemen. But I have a suspicion that in civilizations and in literature policemen are necessary—policemen and teachers and other voices of tradition, with the authority conferred by time and experience. I suspect that civilizations and literatures depend on the *tension* between their outlaws and their law. If that comes unglued, you might as well have unglued the atom. Too much law is rigidity and death; too much lawbreaking is chaos. Joyce himself illustrates the tension principle, for without the Catholic Church, Irish paralysis, and the petrifactions of literature and language against which he enunciated his celebrated "non serviam" he simply is not there.

Tension, dynamic equilibrium between innovation and tradition, liberty and restraint, is what seems to me to make a writing class worthy of its possibilities. Its teacher is more than a spectator and less than a gangboss. Our suspicion of the teaching of writing probably derives from our perception that such teaching is too often either doctrinaire or overly permissive—generally the latter. I have said before, and I quote myself freely, you do not get an edge against a cake of soap. The teacher needs some grit in him, he ought to make any innovation prove itself against the traditional wisdom. He has no business enforcing his principles, but he had better *have* some, and state them, and on occasion defend them, and change them when he must. *Only* when he must.

Every stink that fights the ventilator, says the mordant Stanislaw Lec, thinks it is Don Quixote. The teacher knows it is not and is obligated to say so. But he must be forever alert for the one time in a thousand when it is.

Now I will turn this over to the order of people who would like to add to, or argue with, these remarks: Mr. Barth, Mr. Macauley, Miss Walker.

John Barth:

The Dutch government, a few years ago, saw fit to fly me over to an international writers' symposium in Nordvik, and I found myself so intimidated by the company and by the medium of symposium—it was my first one—that I spent two days over there, and said nothing. I think I said nothing. I decided then that if I ever agreed to sit or stand on another symposium, I would write a few sentences down ahead of time to make sure I said something to justify, or at least account for, my air fare, so I did it. I endorse Wallace Stegner's wise and plain account of the possibility of helping talented novice writers along in their literary apprenticeships, and I also endorse, I think, his pedagogical-equestrian typology. I had the advantage myself, as a student at Johns Hopkins, of two or three teachers in that good fourth category of his, two of them fellow conferees here, Elliott Coleman and Louis Rubin, and I've tried for a number of years in a number of universities to measure up to that ideal myself.

There are a couple of things that Wallace didn't say because they go without saying, and I'm going to say them now. First, we cheerfully acknowledge the fact, as he says, that while much, maybe even most, current published fiction in this country is written by people who've had some experience in college fiction-writing courses, the great majority of students in college fiction-writing courses never publish fiction professionally, simply because their work never gets to be good enough. This unwillingly silent majority is no doubt vaster in some operations than in others, but it's always very large. Elliott Coleman's list of published former students is impressive. If he were undiplomatic enough to keep a list of his unpublished former students, it would be even more impressive, and a friend of mine who taught most of the fiction-writing courses at Penn State for 20 years and kept in unusually close touch with his former students, confessed to me upon his retirement that not one of them had ever published a word to his knowledge, except Vance Packard and James Dougan, and their stuff was nonfiction, and my guess is that the figures in fiction in this regard are probably even sorer and more depressing to contemplate than the figures among student poets.

But the second thing that goes without saying is that nothing is to be inferred from this first thing beyond the Gospel truth that many are called, but few are chosen; and that, as Cardinal Newman said, in effect, no matter how you slice it, the few can never mean the many. Certainly, that circumstance doesn't make our enterprise futile, any more than the odds against grace invalidate the practice of religion. (I find that I'm running into a different series of tropes than Wallace's.) If anything invalidates us, we can say with Newman, that since we've no way of knowing which of our parishioners God has his eye on, we have to pray for all of them; and in fact, at the end of each semester's work, I like to pass on to my students Samuel Beckett's favorite quotation from St. Augustine referring to the thieves that were crucified along with Jesus. Augustine says, "Do not despair. One thief was saved. Do not presume. One thief was damned." Augustine's odds are too optimistic, but his remark applies both to our students, vis-a-vis their literary aspirations, and to us, vis-a-vis our students.

But having acknowledged this state of affairs, I guess I do believe that the right response to it, on the part of those who preside over even our so-called advanced studio courses, is a particular responsibility to appraise the manuscripts in hand in terms of the real corpus of literature, to analyze imperfect solutions of what Cleanth Brooks calls executive problems, in terms of successful solutions of similar problems. This is one of the obvious ways to turn a practicum course in fiction-writing into an adjunct to general literary study. It might be small consolation to students with more ambition than native ability, but it's some justification for our ministering to them, if it's done right. Clearly, it's not very helpful to say to a student, "Kafka did the same sort of thing you're doing, but a lot more brilliantly." He knows that already. Leslie Fiedler told me once that whenever a student asks him, "How can I become a really good writer?," he's tempted to answer, "Be born again." Leaving aside the fact that every now and then a person really *is* reborn, such true advisement is not very useful advice, and I suppose the comparison to the great can be something of a put-down, even in its more generous forms. Wilfred Sheed reports Edmund Wilson's habit in conversation of prefacing a criticism by saying something like, "Now see here, Sheed, this is where you and Tolstoy go wrong." But it can surely be illuminating, and it may even be some solace to be reminded that the problems of narrative strategy that we wrestle with as apprentices have been famously wrestled with by our predecessors, and not always successfully. Some kind of historical perspective is especially enlightening, it seems to me, with respect to very innovative work. It's not to put a writer down that we show him that his Oedipal fiction or his self-destructing fiction or his do-it-yourself fiction already has venerable antecedents in the history of avant-gardism. It's to give him spiritual ancestry and comradeship on the one hand, and on the other, to conserve his imaginative energy, to spare him the naive labor of forever reinventing the wheel.

So much for what goes without saying. As for what perhaps doesn't, I put on the table two modest and unrelated observations that I'm regularly put in mind of in the classroom. One has to do with the famous meretriciousness of most radical formal innovation in fiction, in all the arts, I'm sure. My observation is that most of the traditionalist fiction I read in typescript is pretty meretricious, too, compared to real literary accomplishment. It has to do with that state of actuarial affairs that I mentioned before, the one that goes without saying. The most gifted seminar that I ever presided over at Buffalo, without any particular encouragement nor discouragement from me to do this particular thing, turned itself into a seminar in alternatives to the line and page. Most of what they turned out I've forgotten, but several of the experiments were unforgettably successful, though they happen to be unmarketable for technical reasons—that is there was no way you could do them on the line and the page, since they were alternatives to the line and the page. A year later, virtually the same group was back to pages, lines, sentences, even characters and plots, with about the same percentage of hits and misses, in my judgment, but I must say, with a livelier sense of their medium than they had before their excursions to its perimeters, and I have to admit that a roomful of young traditionalists strikes me as about as depressing as a roomful of Young Republicans.

My second observation has to do with the hierarchy of problems in fiction-writing courses, picking up on Wallace Stegner's third truth, that teaching any art becomes progressively more difficult as one moves on from the rudiments. My experience has been that the first gifts a gifted novice usually shows are a way with the language, a talent for observing and rendering detail, and, less regularly, a sense of fictive potential in people and situations, an inchoate authenticity—I had to write that one down, because I wouldn't have gotten it out impromptu —an inchoate authenticity of eye and voice, in other words, real steam in the boilers, real monkeys on the back, a *Weltanschauung in utero*—which those who have been there, I guess I mean in the Muses' *utero*—usually recognize right off.

On the other hand, the last thing we usually learn, in my experience, is the old Aristotelian business of what constitutes a whole dramatic action and the most strategic ordering of its parts. In my own advanced seminars, I find that, left to themselves, the apprentice writers and critics in the room will usually make most of the points I'll have noted to make about diction, detail, the management of narrative viewpoint, even characterization and the manipulation of images in the manuscript in hand. What I find is usually left for me to criticize, and what I find myself criticizing, perhaps more and more as I move through my own apprenticeship, are such things as the relation of their ground-situations to their dramatic vehicles, the motivation and foreshadowing and pacing of their main actions, the dramatical moral voltages of their several characters; foils, *ficelles, disponibles,* all that goes by the name of dramaturgy; the sense of story as distinct from mere narrative facility, whether in traditionalist writers like John Updike or Philip Roth, or less traditionalist writers like Beckett or Italo Calvino or Donald Barthelme. It's in this area, dramaturgy, that I find myself most often in the role of adversary, coach, and teacher with my students. Once they're past the novice level—and other things equal, it's the students who begin with, or arrive at, good dramaturgical sense, whom I'm most optimistic about when their school days are over. Among them, my guess is that the statistics of eventual publication are less chastening.

Robie Macauley:

My remarks were supposed to be a reply to somebody else's statement, and so I don't have a well-formed, nicely paced talk as the other speakers have had, but I did have a few notes about the subject that Mr. Barth talked about, the matter of the unpublished writer, and to get into that, I want to say first that at most literary conferences, you have a number of King Charles' head questions, questions that keep coming up and bother you, unanswerable questions; and the first one, of course, is always "Can creative writing be taught?" And I think that Mr. Stegner's remarks ought to be printed up and handed out to everybody at the beginning of every conference on writing or creative writing so that that will be disposed of. And you know some of the other questions that always come up, such as: "What is poetry?" "Is fiction dying?" "Is the novel finished?" And so on.

Well, there is another King Charles' head question that it seems to me is a constant one, as you get into the subject of teaching creative writing, and that's always the question of, I think as Mr. Ciardi put it the other day, when do you tell a student that he should no longer gamble the rest of his life on the chance of becoming a fiction writer? When do you tell him that this is a time to cut off, to stop, to turn to something else? And it seems to me that there are two answers to that, there's a good guy answer and a bad guy answer, and I always think of a story that Nelson Algren told me. Nelson Algren is a bad guy in the story, and Kurt Vonnegut is a good guy. They were both teaching at Iowa, at the same university, both teaching fiction courses, and as Nelson got more and more discouraged with the various students in his class, he would say, "What line of work is your father in?" and the student would say something or other, and Nelson would say, "Have you ever thought of going into that?" And then his class, consequently, got smaller and smaller, and after a while, Kurt Vonnegut came to Nelson and said, "Strange, my class is getting bigger and bigger. I keep getting more and more students," and Nelson said, "Well, how do you teach, how do you treat the students who don't have very much promise?" And Kurt Vonnegut said, "Well, I encourage them, I'm very patient with them," and so on; so, consequently, Nelson got down to four students and Kurt Vonnegut got up to about 50 students in his class. Well, I think that is a very important question, but I think it's one that is almost unanswerable, the question of when to tell a student, or how to tell a student, whether he's going to be a writer or not.

It seems to me that, speaking of all the unpublished writers Mr. Barth mentioned, there is a one percent and a 99 percent; and as teachers of creative writing, we always know that—these figures, of course, aren't exact—there is a one percent, a mythical one percent, of the people who come into creative writing classes who are going to be successful writers; no matter what you do to them, whether you help them or challenge them, or, in some cases, hinder them, they're going to turn out to be writers. Then there's the 99 percent, the great number of students who come in with intelligence, a vague idea of being writers, some small talent, perhaps, and what's to be done with them? Well, I think that most teachers of creative writing tend to be very impatient with that large majority drag; that is, most creative writing teachers want to be coaches of writers who are going to be brilliant, who are doing exciting things. I think that we mistake our responsibility and our job a little bit if we take that attitude. It seems to me that I don't think we ever lack for writers; I think that as long as print remains a part of our culture, there's going to be an opportunity for good writers. They'll always appear. What we don't have is a good audience. You remember the little line that always used to be printed on the back of poetry magazines, quotation from Walt Whitman, "Great poets need great audiences." And it seems to me that the creative writing classes in universities are the greatest opportunity to develop a sensitive and intelligent, a great audience, in other words. And the reason, it seems to me, is that students who go into creative writing classes can have the opportunity for learning a kind of method acting; that is, they think, for a while, as writers. They try to practice the art of writing, they get into the whole mystique, the whole kind of sensibility of creating a literary work, and they really, if the teacher goes along with that, become, in a sense, writers, as method actors become whatever they're imitating. It's not an imitation, it's a real kind of sympathetic vibration for some time. That 99 percent, as we noted, go away, they write something, they never really make it as writers, but they're much more sensitive readers. It seems to me that this is the kind of audience that we've got to develop, and we have to look at them as being teachable, in the sense of becoming important as readers. I think that any literature exists in a vacuum unless it has a large number of sensitive, intelligent readers who have got their experience by having gone through the kind of method acting business of doing it. That is, people who have studied music, it seems to me, always have a better appreciation of what it is a musician is doing. That goes for any of the arts. In other words, it's a difference between an audience that is completely a spectator audience and an audience that has some sense of participation, and I think this works for writing, too. Thank you.

Margaret Walker:

I keep having a very sneaky suspicion that this conference was tailor-made for me. I spent four years in the Writers' Workshop at Iowa where so many things were done for me, and where I learned so much, that I have ever afterward been in praise of all creative writing programs. Paul Engle did so many different things that even now I have difficulty trying to assess all the things; finding the wherewithal was his specialty. He irritated me into writing almost every day and helped me find myself in so many ways that years later, when I discovered I knew almost nothing about the novel form and was determined to write one, I went back to the Writers' Workshop in Iowa, and again Paul Engle found the wherewithal, and encouraged me; and I believe that the writer can be taught many things—chiefly, his craft. I believe he can be taught structure, I believe he can be taught a great deal about the elements of fiction. I do not believe he can be taught the art of fiction. I believe there is a distinct difference between craft and art.

My remarks are somewhat random, and maybe they sound loosely put together after hearing these formal statements. I certainly am more in praise of the programs than I can possibly be in praise of the creative writing teacher as I have experienced it. For the past 30 years, I have been engaged at some time or other—not just now and then, mostly then—as a creative writing teacher, and I keep wondering if I have hindered more than I have helped. I had a very brilliant student at West Virginia State College the very first year I taught, and I recognized his genius, I tried to encourage him, but I knew I could teach him nothing, I really didn't know anything to teach him. He seemed very unassuming, without any confidence, and didn't seem to know that he had a very great gift. I kept telling him, "I just don't know what to do, what to say," but today you know him as William Demby, the author of *Beetlecreek* and *The Catacombs.* He had to go to other creative writing teachers before he learned his craft; I'm sure he did not learn it from me.

I'd like to say a few words about language, and the teaching of fiction. The only tools the writer has are words. Insofar as one is able to control language, the writer succeeds with the craft of writing and the art of fiction. Teaching writing, it seems to me, merely means inspiring the writer toward his own creative thinking and helping him to manipulate words, teaching him how words may be controlled, how the language may be controlled effectively. It may seem trite to say the only business of language is to communicate, but, then, basically, that is all the writer is trying to do—communicate ideas and emotions.

We have to use the language as we know and understand it. Everybody knows that language is a changing thing, because it is a living thing. It is palpable. We use words we know, and the teacher always cautions the writer to write only what is familiar to him. The young black writer's language today is a point in question. I do not believe it is a foreign commodity. It is what that young black writer knows and feels and what he lives, what he thinks, and this has always been true, whether it is plantation dialect, the slang of the twenties and the thirties, or the explosive speech of the inner city. The young black writer who has turned away from an Anglo-Saxon tradition and a European education has done so for possibly three reasons. One, his writing was never accepted in the traditional American white literary world unless it was imitative, unless it was servile or compromising, and this was never intellectually honest. Today the young black writer seems to be in revolt because he wants to do his own thing, as he says. He wants to speak to the black world and express the black experience, and create his own system. He wants to follow his tradition, as Anthony McNeill said yesterday, a tradition that for generations and for centuries has not been a written tradition, but an oral tradition. And although black anything is just as American in this country as white anything, I wish to disagree strongly on the issue of black English. I think we could spend a whole summer talking about this business of black English. In my book, there is no such animal. There may be a black idiom in the American language, and I'm sure there always has been and always will be, but black Americans who are people of African descent speak an American language, a language not merely adopted but adapted daily, to the changes of daily living, to the lives of black people as oppressed and repressed, but never suppressed. I venture to say we have had much to do with keeping that language vital and dramatic and not static, but colorful, rich, and as varied as we can with all the nuances of our black experience.

Now, Wallace Stegner says he has difficulty, 63 and white, relating to that black and 23-year-old writer, and I appreciate his honesty. Is it because you're not black and cannot understand black humanity? Well, I am neither 63 nor white, and I relate to this young writer. Is it because I am—is it merely because I am black? Because I ask myself, what is it about words or language that I can teach that you cannot? After all, I have also had this education in white universities superimposed on my southern black origins and my early black southern education. What is it I can teach about language that is different from the same methods or the same things about language that I learned in white universities? After all, my teachers were white as well as black, and if I succeed, ever, as a writer, it must be with that black idiom, because that is me. That black writer, like that white writer, must be himself; a natural-born woman, and a natural-born man, writing about a world we understand, interpreting ourselves as black people in a hostile white land, trying to make the society in which we live less hostile, seeking understanding and liberation, seeking liberation and reconciliation through the mere manipulation of words.

We are called upon as teachers—I always feel the teacher really has only one real function, and that is to inspire his students to think. He can serve as a guide, he can encourage, but he can only teach the craft, how to manipulate the words effectively and powerfully, and when we have done that, the writer's natural genius and talent, proclivities and predilections, take over. With conscious use of his craft, he brings what Coleridge calls his esemplastic power to bear upon the words, and carves out his masterpiece as an artist. Sheer artistry, sheer creativity, sheer power to manipulate ideas and figurations or configurations of ideas, that power is beyond the teacher's profits. It is an individual prerogative, a lonely privilege as separate as one's own identity and entity, one's natural-born, God-given, holy and beautiful right, but the emotional meanings of words, the precise shade of meaning, the shaping of figurative language, the powerful symbology of words communicating feelings and expressing ideas, capturing fancy and riding the numinal wings of imagination. Well, you can teach him some of that, now, can't you? And does it matter about the color of the skin? I agree that the printed word is black on white paper, but that's as far as my black English goes.

I have one other word here, on something that struck me quite forcibly last night, listening to Mr. Barth, and that is myth as the seedbed of literature, just as it is the seedbed of religion. The religionists take symbols, myths, and dogma, and ritualize them, but the literary artist takes symbol, myth, and incidents, and perhaps he ritualizes them in his organization of fiction, in his dramatization of it. I believe in creative writing programs. I believe that the teacher can do so very much for the student that there is always a reason for trying, but I believe that the blending of talent or genius, creativity or originality and craft or technique, too, into a work of art, is what we call artistry, and that is what the writer alone can do for himself.

Stegner:

Are there people on the panel who want to respond to anything that has been said up to now, or do you all want to wait?

George Garrett:

I just want to say one thing; it's so simple-minded that I think everyone else assumed it, but one aspect that hasn't been mentioned in this panel, overtly or explicitly, here or yesterday, has to do with a matter of perfect selfishness. What's in it for us, the teachers? And I would like to suggest that one of the pleasures and excitements for us is that this particular kind of teaching is an exchange, a sharing. It's not simply a stance in which we repeat certain basic kinds of information and apply these to particular situations. Ideally, each situation that we encounter, each sensuous, affective experience that is a story or a poem, is a unique occasion, and there is something that the student is giving to the teacher; always, there is an exchange, we learn. That's one of the pleasures and excitements of this kind of teaching, and I think when we cease to receive, and teach from a stance of giving alone, then we're kind of in trouble. But as long as we have this sense of exchange, of our learning as we are teaching, as we are meeting problems and articulating them, we're finding out about ourselves and about our writing as well. After all, we are writers, too, and we learn through doing this, through the teaching, so that I just wanted to emphasize that one aspect of it is a shared experience, an imaginative one always.

Stegner:

I will subscribe to that, George. I may have been partly responsible for seeming to leave out my debt of gratitude that I owe to any number of students over a great many years. If I'm alive today, they're probably responsible. Anyone else? Ernie?

Ernest J. Gaines:

I think you were saying, Margaret, that it seems that whenever we get together, we're fighting—in a bar or anyplace we are, we're fighting each other. I think you said that the young black writers were leaving the white—

Walker:

—esthetic?

Gaines:

Yeah, right, to do their own thing.

Walker:

I'm not saying that that means that they've found themselves, I'm saying that's how they've done it.

Gaines:

I think, well, I studied writing and I'm no teacher. I don't know why I'm up here, really, because I've never taught; but I did go through the writing program at San Francisco State College and at Stanford, with Mr. Stegner here, and I think I learned writing, if I know anything about it, through reading established white writers, the great writers. If I know anything about the short story, I think I got it from reading Chekhov, I got it from reading De Maupassant and Hemingway, etc. The novel I got from so many writers I can't name them all. I got from these men technique; but I also got a lot from the great blues singers, the great jazz musicians, I got from Muddy Waters, I got from Lightnin' Hopkins, I got from Billie Holliday, all of the greats; Count Basie's understatements are to me as good as Hemingway's understatements are.

Walker:

I certainly agree.

Gaines:

So I feel that being an American young black writer, he can combine these things, and so he does not have to leave this, but he can combine them to form his new thing, whatever that is.

Walker:

I'm not in disagreement at all. I said just before we came in to Ralph Ellison that Stephen Henderson has just written a book *Understanding the New Black Poetry,* and he talks about black music and black speech as reference for the new literature, and I agree that we have a great heritage and a great tradition, and I am not disagreeing with what you're saying. I'm sure this is the ideal thing. This is a real contribution that young black writers can make today, that we must be aware of our own tradition, and I do not think, I do not agree at all, that they should forget about all that has been done in the past, all of the great literature that is our heritage, too, of American and English or European literature. I'm saying that we have had the difficulty of not having the Afro-American or the African tradition, the oral tradition, understood and expressed, whether it is in the folk speech of the ballad, whether it is in the jazz music, the blues, etc., but that we have had the problem of combining exactly what you're saying here, and that we have had the problem of having this African tradition, this oral tradition, ignored or not recognized, and that today, the young black, I think, is very knowledgeable in that part. I am not one who will deny the cultural heritage of either the European or the African, and I think that is our great problem in America today, to have an understanding of the value, the equal value of these two traditions.

Stegner:

I couldn't agree more. Now, Ralph, you're the only country not heard from, so I think you should be.

Ralph Ellison:

Well, I have to say something. I would agree with much of what's been said, but I would play it backwards into time, and recall that sometimes, in the 1830's, when Americans were very much concerned in establishing, through language, their unique identities as Americans, as against colonials, as against people who spoke the King's English, that Whitman was looking at the speech of Negro Americans and saying explicitly that in it he saw the foundation for an American form of grand opera. The stories told by slaves have always found incorporation into the imaginative works of our great writers. Mark Twain used the folkways, the folklore, the speech, was very proud of his awareness of its richness, told the stories on platform, never denied where he got them from. This is a part of our heritage which has been operating on us, and we just haven't been teaching about it, haven't pointed out to the young blacks that they are there. What they're revolting against is partially ours. Their grandparents helped create it. The African voice has always sounded, it's always resonated in the way Americans speak, and if it does resonate, and it certainly resonates in Faulkner, it resonates in George Garrett, it even resonates in Saul Bellow, if you know where to look, and if it does resonate, then we must realize that language is not an abstract thing, but it is a form of communication which not only allows us to have values, to exercise memory, but it enspirits our lives with value; so somehow we have been enspiriting the language, and perhaps it has been most effective because we haven't been quite aware that this was what was going on. All white Americans are partially black, and all black Americans certainly are partially white. That is the essence of the American thing, which leads me to another point which I think is worthwhile vis-a-vis teaching.

Stanley Hyman told me a long time ago, he said, "Well, you've started teaching, but you have to accept the fact that you aren't going to find many writers—that is, really talented people—you're going to find ambitious people, you're going to find brilliant people, you're going to find people from whom you will learn a lot," and that turns out to be true, but I've discovered something else. It's that in this country, which has not really found itself for all of its power, for all of its turmoil, literature does have the function of creating values, of helping us have feedbacks upon ourselves from our diverse regions, races, cultural backgrounds. Americans are in a constant situation of having to achieve some sort of objectivity about ourselves, and our daily functioning imposes upon us the necessity of engaging in what I call a constant study of comparative humanity. It's a tedious, it's a tortuous, situation, but at the same time, it is frequently exciting, because there is a wonder involved in this crazy American situation. Now, if you can teach the would-be writer just to read from the inside, if you can teach him the relation between a technique and its moral and philosophical implications, if you can do that, if you can show him, lead him to discover for himself how his life links up with the lives of others as drawn out, dramatized, and made eloquent in literature, you will have done something very much worth doing. You will have restored the teaching of literature to the center of the humanities and to the center of the university. If you get a great writer, a brilliant writer, that's the gravy. The hard part, and the exciting part, is to learn as you try to help the youngster discover for himself. He'll learn all of the phrases, he'll learn all of the abstractions of the critics, because that's much easier to do than to get a character across a stage or across the river and into the trees and out again. Well, that's that.

Stegner:

I think that probably will bring us to the point of questions from the floor. As before, there will be microphones available, and when you have a question, please raise your hand so that we can get a microphone to you; otherwise, you can't be heard. Yes.

Audience:

Thank you. I'd like to address these remarks to Margaret Walker. It may be altogether true that the white teacher ought to have no more trouble teaching a black student than a white student. Certainly it's true in my own experience, that one of the most influential teachers I ever had as an undergraduate was black, and she didn't have any trouble reaching me. In fact, it was she who first put into my hands Mr. Ellison's *The Invisible Man,* which had just been published. At any rate, there is a problem, though, which I have encountered. I teach a small creative writing class in a women's college in New

England, and clearly my best students, very best students have been black, there just is no question about it. The problem is one particular case I'm thinking of—and part of the reason I'm here is because of this girl: she's from the very deep South, and the problem is that *she* thinks I cannot understand what she's saying and there's a resistance on her part to me, and it's breaking down this resistance—she's angry, she's militant, and I admire her, but she doesn't trust me. How do I get through to her? In the meantime, there's also another aspect here. She's in danger of flunking out, because she isn't doing well in the academic courses because of her prior preparation. We want to hold on to her, of course, because of her great talent, and we'll do everything we can to, but in the meantime, what do we do? Can you help me?

Walker:

I certainly don't have all the answers, because I think this is a problem that teachers are facing all over the country today. It is true that the young black is very distrustful, not only of the white teacher. He is distrustful of the black teacher who he feels may be a bit whitened. He feels that the black teacher is under the influence of his white education and his European influences, and he wants to be stripped of all of this. I'm sure that we are in an extreme place now, where attitudes are concerned, but I think the answer, again, is in arriving at a common ground of humanity, that it is in the basic understanding of people as people, and I can remember that I never had that feeling about my teachers, because they certainly conveyed to me their interest in me. I was able to feel that this person is trying to do something for my good. I had the shocking experience at Yale, when a professor, whom I greatly admired, told me that black people were all right as long as they remained primitive and didn't imitate white people. This shocked me so, and struck me—I was just aghast. Then I realized that what black people have experienced in this country is an insidious form of institutional racism that the black today sometimes feels. He feels that that animal is behind him sometimes when the animal isn't, you know. He feels that the lion is always pursuing him, and so he runs when nothing is pursuing him. This is because the history has been so overladen with all of these racist implications. For a man to tell me that as long as I remained primitive, I'm all right, and at the same time to have a white woman in Illinois ask me, "Are you bitter because you are black?" and not understand that that is completely outside the realm of human understanding. She could not conceive of me as another human being, and she simply thought that being black should give me an inferior feeling, a feeling of shame and not of pride, and it is that sort of thing that the young Negro today is fighting. I'm not sure that anybody has the answer, because the panacea is beyond our immediate reach, insofar as I understand it. There may be others who can tell you. So far as this person is concerned—she will trust you if you trust her.

Stegner:
Anybody else want to respond to that one? Other questions? Wait for the microphone, please, will you?

Audience:
When the members of the audience speak, we do not see them.

Stegner:
Yes.

Audience:
And as you know, you can conceive of what's said by seeing the sayer.

Stegner:
All right, we'll try to go on television, thank you. Questions; yes, right below him.

Audience:
Don't we have a real problem in what Mr. Stegner said, and Margaret Walker? He said he had difficulty at his age in talking or communicating with a writer who is black and 20—

Stegner:
No, that's not quite what I said, but go ahead.

Audience:
Well, anyway—I'm sorry if I misconstrued a little bit, but I think I see a problem here, regardless of my language, and Margaret Walker said earlier that she felt that what the white teacher could teach the black, for sure, was a sense of the nuances of our common tradition, Anglo-Saxon tradition and the mixture of black resonance in that tradition. If you have a man at Yale who has that attitude, I don't see how he could teach the black student at all in the matter of even the nuances of his own tradition, which he might have a great mastery of, simply because the black student would realize immediately that

what would be the use of learning all these nuances if there was that much of a division between the two?

Walker:
And that's what black people do feel.

Stegner:
Yes. Do you want to respond to that, Margaret, or shall I?

Walker:
Yes, if you please.

Stegner:
I should explain what I meant when I said how can I, white and 63, teach anything to a young black writer of 23. What I meant is that the things which most burn him up, the steam in his boiler, as John puts it, is coming from an area of authority in which I have no authority at all. That is to say, he understands his own experience, his own language, his own tradition, as I do not. I can tell him, perhaps, how that tradition fits into a larger tradition, which is the best I can do for him, I think, but I cannot correct his black English into standard English and do him any good, I'll do him harm. That was really all I meant. Yes.

Audience:
I'm getting a head of steam up here. I have the impression that the role of the instructor is to teach the craft and to help him with money and a place to live.

Stegner:
Careful about that.

Audience:
But not to be his psychiatrist, and I hear you all up there speaking as if your students are idiots who need to be brought along, and you have to not say this, you'll hurt their feelings, and you not say that, and I think that's a lot of baloney, that your job is to teach craft and nothing else. Amen.

Audience:
I would like to make a comment, Mr. Stegner. I'm Roy Basler, and I'm very much interested in this, and I couldn't stay outside and not make one comment. God forbid that I'd try to defend any professor at Yale. I wonder, however, if he might not have had a point that Miss

Walker may have overlooked. I think that any writer of fiction who ever becomes an artist should not and cannot forget that he is primitive. If Jack Barth isn't primitive, I don't know who is, and whatever there is of culture and civilization, whether it comes from one part of the globe or another, no writer is ever going to be his best unless he starts with his primitivism. Thank you.

Walker:

That's not what *he* meant, though. He wasn't talking about primitivism in terms of craft or of art. You know, there's a whole school of primitive painters, and many of us like them, you know, and that's a different thing from what he meant, and black people are acutely sensitive to people who believe for a long time that these folk are still savage from the land of Africa, maintaining their—what they call primitive instincts, and, as you see, not understanding black—not understanding African culture at all, and not understanding that within the realm of African culture there are highly sophisticated people and cultures and traditions, and that this, certainly, did not apply to a third-generation American who happened to be of African descent.

Stegner:

Yes, more questions.

Audience:

I'd like to point out that Miss Margaret Walker said she didn't have the panacea. I'd like to suggest that it's deeper, that problem is deeper, than it appears. Speaking personally, I've been blind since the age of five, so I thought I'd be the perfect teacher. Mr. Stegner had his troubles, I thought I wouldn't have any, not being able to tell the difference. Just recently, I had a class in the teaching of fiction, and a student was most unhappy, most resentful, and after the first two failing papers, finally replied to my repeated invitations, came in and talked to me, and said, "You know, Mr. Russell, I think you start out with an advantage." I said, "No, really, what's that?" She said, "Well, you can't see," and I said, "Well, you know, I always kind of thought it would be an advantage to know how to read and write," and she said, "No. The whole point is, what you don't understand is, I'm black," and I didn't, and she couldn't rest until she told me that. I thought that was very interesting, what do you think of that?

Stegner:

What *do* you think of that?

Walker:

In this country, when we talk about race, we are involved with layers of mores and patterns of our culture that have nothing to do with whether we are invisible—whether we are the invisible people who cannot be seen because no one wants to see us. It really, really does not limit itself to what you see, it's not just the visual thing, it's a cultural business that goes back into the way we have shaped our country, and if it had anything to do with just color, there are a lot of white-skinned black people, and they wouldn't have any problems, but they have problems not because of color, but because of the meaning of race in this country. Racism over against humanity, the desire to—well, the great need to understand people as people on the basis of common humanity, rather than to misunderstand people in terms of race. We have a very great potential in America in terms of our pluralistic society, but there is a problem for most of us, and black people are more conscious of it because we are the ones who suffer. The fellow who doesn't suffer is not aware of it, and he is not aware, even, of what the culture has done to him. He's not aware of how this has affected his own thinking. It has become an unconscious part of our society. I don't want to make too much of it, but that's my answer to that.

Stegner:

We have time for a few more questions, I guess. I think there were some hands up here. Where did I see, this one over here, quite a long time ago.

Audience:

People have commented a good deal on the idea of the teacher as teaching the craft, but no one has talked at all about whether a teacher can do anything in terms of subject matter, that is, getting a person writing about something that's important, and I find that people who know the craft will have a good day when they have something important to say. Would anyone like to comment on whether or not it's possible to stir something in a person just in terms of an interesting subject?

Stegner:

Does any member of the panel—John?

Barth:

Speaking as a primitive, I guess, I wanted to respond to that question only because I had the illuminating experience myself as a student of, it seems to me in retrospect, perhaps wasting a couple of years of my apprenticeship at Johns Hopkins trying to write a kind of fiction that I later found out I simply had no gift for; that is to say, in this case, a kind of heavy realism, very straightforward, unironic, uncomical. And one of my instructors, I think it was Louis Rubin, suggested once, he liked it okay, but he said, "Did you ever try doing something comic?" It seemed to me to be a frightfully presumptuous thing to try to be humorous in fiction, whereas somehow or other it didn't seem presumptuous to be unhumorous, and I found, for better or worse, that that was a much more congenial thing, just as I found that trying to write in the long forms was, from the very first time, more congenial to me than trying to work in the short forms back in those days. Now, that's not a matter of discovering subject matter, it's a matter of discovering a kind of address and radical disposition, I suppose, or orientation, towards the medium. I remember that, because sometimes when I'm working with students who it seems to me have a considerable gift, but in whose work the form, the medium, the address still seems to be more their adversary than their ally, I've made that kind of suggestion, not "Did you ever try writing about so-and-so?"—I can't imagine doing that—but "Did you ever try trying to be funny?" Or if they're not being very funny, but trying to, "Did you ever try not trying to be funny?" And the same thing goes with the difference in the congeniality of genres. It seems to me that sometimes a young person, I suppose, is simply intimidated at the prospect of sailing into the longer forms, the novella form or the novel form. I think that's a worthwhile kind of trepidation, but sometimes it's worthwhile to encourage them to do that. It's not subject matter, but—

Stegner:
Yes.

Audience:
It seems to me that the really great writers are going to be able to project their imaginations into a character whether he's white or black, or whether you're a woman writing about a man, or a man writing about a girl, or George Garrett writing about Walter Raleigh, or whatever. The black-white distinctions seem to me to be so terribly limiting. It's almost as if some black writers are saying—not saying, but perhaps doing so much—what I want to know is this: Is anyone on the stage, for instance, writing, if you're black, writing about a main character who's white—a young white girl, or whatever, and if so, I would like to know how it's coming off? I might also direct this to Mr.

Garrett in that I happen to know—didn't you have a black story published once? Would you respond to that please?

Garrett:
I think that has to do with a regional overlay. What you're talking about is a story that is kind of interesting about what happens to regionalism. I had no thought of race whatsoever in this particular short story. It had to do with the school I went to, public elementary school in the segregated South, and these were the rowdy kids that I went to school with, and they talked like that—and I just published the story and didn't mention color at all, and next thing, it showed up next to James Baldwin in an anthology of black writing, and I'm very proud of it. I think—as a southerner, I think all around me was a certain condescension, it was put together—the first anthology, I think, was put together in Canada, and they automatically assumed that any school children who talked rough and played with knives or something, must be black, not realizing that that's part of our common southern heritage.

Ellison:
Mr. Stegner, may I say something to that?

Stegner:
Please.

Ellison:
You know, this whole line of questioning seems to be the result of an ideology that's been imposed upon the writer—at least attempts are being made to impose it. After all, as Al Murray had an occasion to say, Uncle Remus was teaching calculus. He wasn't just telling those little white kids tales. He was instructing them. This has been a role throughout the short history of this country. In the South, there's never any doubt in the mind of the people who held power that some of the best teachers, some of the people who understood values best, were blacks working around them. I've taught for a few years now, and most of my students have been white. I never felt that there was something about my blackness which walled off my receptions, ability to teach or to communicate with them, or to learn from them. I certainly will not Jim Crow my imagination when it comes to creating characters. I write about a society, a society in which all of us are people, all of us are functioning. I just feel that this is a delimiting and really absurd period that we're going through. It won't work,

and those people, black or white, who feel that they cannot depict the complexity of American experience should just hang up the typewriter, because they don't have the proper arrogance, nor do they have the proper pioneering spirit. I just don't see it any other way. What is this business? If Shakespeare could create Jews, or what he thought were Jews, and Welshmen, why should we try to do any less than to depict those people who ride the buses with us, at least?

Stegner:

That should be more or less definitive on that, I should think. Yes. We have time, I think, I don't know how long this is supposed to run, till 12:30? Well, we'll go on for a while, anyway, until we're called off.

Audience:

Yeah, I'd like to address these remarks to George Garrett, but anybody else can respond to them. You spoke, very briefly, about the association between teacher and writer, and that you consider this to be a shared experience. Now, I have found that, ultimately, the decision must be made as to priority, and that being: are you going to be a teacher or are you going to be a writer? Because either one is very time-consuming. If you're going to be a writer, you have to be very selfish, 'cause that's what the profession demands; and if you're going to be a teacher, you must be selfless, 'cause that's what that profession demands. So you obviously have a conflict going on there, and I'd like to know how you go about resolving it.

Garrett:

Well, it seems to me, that's a very good question, and it's a very large problem for me, which is one of the reasons I mentioned that, reaching a point in which, perhaps through ruthlessness, perhaps through the selfishness of one's interest in one's own work, one begins not to be giving and receiving as much as you should. It's a continuing, ongoing kind of thing. I have tried from time to time, when I feel myself becoming frozen and inhibited, which is really what we've been talking around—all kinds of inhibitions are imposed on us by all sorts of things and that's what we're fighting against—I drop out when I can afford to do so, and try to get my head together, and see if I can get back and do the balancing act again. It is a balancing act, because teaching in itself is an art form, too, and it is very satisfactory. There's a danger not only that you'll spend too much time on your own writing at the expense of the students (which I find myself doing, and then I have to take a step back), there's also the other danger on the other side. You get so engaged with the teaching that you are no longer a practitioner, and at that point you're in trouble, too, because you're not communicating the professional's approach to this. The only thing I can say is that there is this conflict, and if you can't live with it, we got a free country, somewhat, you can move on. I'm fixing, as a matter of fact, to drop out of teaching for a little while, not too long after this conference, and rethink some things, and then I'll probably have to go back to work. I don't like doing the work, I'd rather drive a truck than to teach badly, and I can tell it myself when I'm teaching badly. It comes on in cycles, and then I just have to find something else to do.

Stegner:

I'd like to subscribe to that, and also to remark that the device which I have sometimes tried of splitting time, going on half-time, is not nearly so good as going on full-time for a while and dropping completely out for a while. If you can go on one semester and off one semester, you're luckier than if you're half-time through the year, because you'll get more work done and you'll probably teach better, too. There was a question right up here somewhere, yes, on the aisle.

Audience:

I'd like to ask any of the panel, in connection with the importance of publication, in your counseling of students, often it's the worst students who are very anxious about publication, and the better ones who are not concerned at all and are very hesitant about it. Could the panel give us some advice on how much you talk about publication; what do you do about it when you feel a student is ready for it?

Stegner:

Anybody? Well, I can tell you what I do. I don't even mention publication until I think something is publishable. If a student mentions it to me, I may demur, saying I don't think he can do it, but go ahead and try. It is, as George says, a free country, up to a point. It's hard on the *amour propre* to be turned down, but it's also instructive, and why not? If they want to try, if they are premature in the notion that they are publishable, let them go ahead and try, but if they ask my advice first, I say probably what I think; and if they don't ask my advice, I never give it until I think they are publishable. Actually, it seems to me a writing class should be as far from the commercial as possible. One of the things a university can do is to remove you from all of that, you're practicing a kind of apprenticeship, and obviously also many people move, during the course of a university year, from apprentice to something like journeyman, and that will happen all the time. It will be a cause, I suppose, of a certain amount of envy, but also, I have found, a certain amount of cheer to other members of the class, a curious kind of *esprit de corps* can grow up in a class like that, and the good luck or the real accomplishment of one member of it can cheer up a whole group, and actually make them write better; but I would keep, myself, the notion of publication down as low as possible.

Barth:

Wallace? Could I just add to that on the other—I quite agree with that—on the other hand, it seems to me that especially with writers with whom one has worked for a little while, and writers who are moving along in their apprenticeship, it's quite important to do just the opposite sometimes; that is, to urge them to begin to test their manuscripts and the judgments of the classroom against real editorial opinion, not only for the reason that Wallace just mentioned, but also to avoid the situation which some of you may have, I hope, agreed with, as I did, that Harvey Swados spoke of in that posthumous article of his, published in the Sunday *Times Book Review* a couple of weeks ago. That is, the kind of unrealistic situation, that one has already seen in some of the other arts, of whole classes of writing students whose first concern is not necessarily to bring their art before whatever audience it has, but to get something published so that they can get a teaching job, teaching fiction writing in some junior college, and one has this vision of an enormous proliferation of the activity, not of writing for publication and for audiences at all, but of writing as an activity in order to become a teacher of writing, who will then bring up new generations of writers who will not publish, but will become teachers of writing over and over again, in the way that educationists become professors of education rather than educators, and so forth. So to counter that, I think it's a useful thing early on—when a man or a woman reaches a point where his work is not obviously to be ruled out, not illiterate, in other words—to begin to go through the business of putting it in the mail and hearing real editorial judgments and not just the opinions of his peers and the captive critic in the room.

Garrett:

There's another aspect of that that I'd like to mention. One of the most boring things that I do—and it drives classes wild, with sleep—has nothing to do with individual publication (which I think is a personal thing, and I will try to help them if they come and ask), but I feel that a failure of courses to begin with in contemporary literature, and in a good deal of scholarship about the literature of the past, has been a failure on the part of scholars and critics and therefore a barrier that shows up in creative writing classes and writing and reading classes—a failure to take even basic cognizance of the facts of the literary scene, the literary marketplace: what it is, how many books are published, sort of basic things. As a part of their craft, I usually try to come back about once a month and touch on the latest scandalous statistics and how bleak it always is, a picture of how many manuscripts get submitted, how many get published, what is a break-even point on a book, a few things. At best, they will not be easily conned by publishers later on. When they get the free cup of tea and then are shown the back door after their first novel, they won't be surprised after this. But they don't want to hear that, I've discovered, so maybe I've been wrong about it. It's a little like—I was living in Italy, didn't have much money, and we were living in an apartment with Italian working-class guys who were all Communists, and I told them, just so I could get along with them, that I was a big-shot in the American Communist Party, and they accepted this, and we discussed it a great deal. They wanted to know, they really had the myth that the streets were paved with gold in America, if they could just get over there—it was all riches and everybody was rich and happy, and I kept trying to explain to them that this was not so. Finally, they said, "Look, we're intelligent people, and we know that what you're telling us about the United States is true, but nevertheless, we choose not to believe it. We want that place to be there, mythologically, in this sense." Try as one will to tell writing students, and reading students, as a part of the contemporary scene, what this rather rapidly changing world of books and publishing and business is all about, they finally don't want to hear that, but I feel irresponsible for not doing it, so I let them sleep about once a month while I reel off whatever facts I've come up with. The publishers say I'm lying, too, that I'm presenting much too bleak a picture, but that's just one aspect of it. I think the real point I'm trying to make is that we cannot ignore that they are free.

I had a student who wanted to write, and this subject engaged him, an epic poem about a mouse in couplets, and I thought, as epic poems about mice in couplets go, it's one of the finest that I've read, but I had to explain to him that that was his bag and thing and I'd go with it and read it sympathetically, but that I doubted that Doubleday was waiting with bated breath for this. When he understood that and did it, I was proud of him, because he had no interest in publishing, he had an interest in doing that thing in couplets, and he did, and that's fine, but I do have—we do have—that responsibility, on occasion, to be practical enough to remind them of the fact that we are not working in a vacuum completely. There is this interchange between that world and our world, and we ought to keep it alive. We ought to know what's happening out there as best we can for our own safety, if nothing else.

Stegner:
I think we have time, probably, for one more question.

Audience:
Yes, I sometimes have a vision of a student named Bernard Philip Mahler who starts in elementary school, taking a course in creative writing, going on to high school for a creative writing course, reaching college, taking Narrative I and then Advanced Narration, then Advanced Narration II, going on to graduate school where he takes a number of courses and receives a degree, a master's degree in creative writing, then becomes a teacher of creative writing. Isn't there a danger, somewhere along the line, that out of all this we're going to get a kind of dry and narrow literature? Perhaps the answer is, if one is really a good writer it doesn't make any difference, that one will recover even from this sort of thing. But don't you sometimes feel, as teachers of writing, that you ought to tell a student, "Look, get the hell out."

Stegner:
There are those who would say to you, "We already have that dryness." They will say it fairly frequently, and they may be right. There is a certain incestuous quality about it, and I suppose when we talk about creating the audience, which we do and which is a real creation that goes along with the creation of writers, we are also talking about booby-prizes, really; that most of those people who are created as a good audience would much rather be writers than an audience; it's like kissing your sister, as they say. I don't know; as far as I can tell, everything in the universe sort of balances out, and every virtue has its countervailing vice. I would guess that when—if I know any history at all—that when things get really dried up within the colleges, there will be a revolt among the writers and they'll take care of it. I would just leave it to history, I think. I think probably we should close it up now, if everybody is willing.

The Writing of Nonfiction Prose

John Ciardi, chairman; Ralph Ellison, Josephine Jacobsen, William J. Lederer, N. Scott Momaday, Louis D. Rubin, Jr., Wallace Stegner

John Ciardi:

Ladies and gentlemen, I'm happy in a way that the final session is nonfiction, as we've been talking—always, when we get to talking about creative writing, whatever that is, there's a certain amount of soul-belching that has to be accounted for. I'm not against it, we all have our egos, they're apes we live with, I think they should be taken out and pampered every once in a while. Take a look at my ego, I'll take a look at yours, and let's see if they can be kind to one another, but in nonfiction, I think it is possible to make a necessary point. If you're going to write nonfiction, you must in some sense be subordinate to your material. We can therefore talk about discipline without being accused about the humility of discipline, without being accused of caste systems or arrogance, simply as necessities of what we're doing, and I wish more of that had been stressed in some of the other discussions. I have a prepared statement; it is dull, as all prepared statements are, but I follow.

If there is some subtlety that will lead to a useful definition of nonfiction, I have not found it. I have no choice but to hack the knot I cannot untie: nonfiction is any piece of writing that does not claim to be either poetry or fiction.

Definition draws a categorical circle that, ideally, includes everything that belongs in the category being defined and excludes from it everything that is not of that category. As I have drawn my circle (with a hacking instrument), it includes business letters and inter-office memos (some of which I have known to be works of fiction), news items, scientific abstracts (which are news items about the particles and their combinations, treatises on the nature of almost anything, and even the writing on the note cards one files on the way to writing the treatise). Strictly speaking, tables of logarithms and the day's stock market quotations are nonfiction.

Since we are at hackwork, let all of these be hacked out of present consideration. One reason for hacking these *genera* is that the people who write them tend to care more about what is being said (information) and less about how it is said (style).

One advantage of hackwork is that it need not splice the ends of everything it severs. I have seen business letters that were obviously composed by a would-be stylist. And some dogs do walk on their hind legs. In general, dogs can reasonably be taken to be quadrupeds. In the same way, nonfiction can reasonably be taken to be a sort of writing that involves a sense of style as well as an intent to convey information.

In one sense, the style may even be the information. If I write a report on the number of automobiles in the United States and work out mathematically the total volume of their emissions and the number of particles per cubic foot of air that those emissions come to, my method may be factual, but I am taking statistical facts to be so consequential that they almost amount to conclusions. If I interview a doctor at Metropolitan Hospital and conclude with his observation that in X hundred autopsies over the last 20 years he has never found a city dweller whose lungs have not been blackened by the air he breathed, I am also talking about air pollution but I am obviously attempting, by means of a dramatic anecdote, to entrap you into *feeling* a danger; I am asking you to feel it inside yourself. If I go off into a reverie about the sediments I find on the leaves of my rhododendrons and report my personal sense of how the air is darkening down upon all of us, I am offering some information, but basically I am trading feelings with my reader.

It may be useful to think of the first method of treating this subject as statistical, of the second as fictional, and of the third as poetic. Writers of nonfiction, of course, use all three methods in different combinations.

I am a writer of a regularly published nonfiction column. I touch on all three of these methods. My general practice, however, is to trade feelings. If I had more statistical facts and more dramatic anecdotes available, I might rely on them, and be glad to. Lacking facts and anecdotes to be impressive with, I must mine my own ignorance. I am, therefore, one of the last practitioners of a dead form that used to be called "the familiar essay." I fell into my habit of writing familiar essays because I was too ignorant to know the form was dead. And partly I fell into it because I am a poet. Poetry is the one form of writing most available to an ignorant man who is willing to take his ignorance seriously. Had I significant things to say about atomic particles, I am sure I would be tempted to say them as impressively as possible. Lacking the sort of information that could allow me to be impressive, I write the familiar essay. I cannot, however, recommend it to others.

Let the familiar essay be hacked out of present consideration on the grounds that it is dead.

Hack out, too, what used to be called "expository writing." Expository writing produced "themes." Themes, at the level of college English—back in the days when English usage still seemed relevant to the college curriculum—came in *lumpen* fact to about 1,500 words. In a dream of the classical ideal, they were supposed to have a beginning, a middle, and an end. In the middle-muddle of practice they consisted of five or six or seven topic assertions (topic sentences) each supported by a developed body of evidence or argumentation called a paragraph. If the topic assertions seemed to be coherent and if the paragraph development seemed to support the topic assertions as made, that was as much as any professor could ask as Tuesday morning's version of that week's classical ideal. Hack out expository writing on the grounds that there is no market for the classical ideal.

Whatever we are left with at hack's end will have to do as nonfiction. We still don't know what it is, but we recognize that it has pushed poetry out of our national magazines, and that it has all but pushed fiction out. It has also come to dominate publishers' lists. If only as a hackwork rule, it is reasonable to suggest that a man who wants to publish had better learn to write nonfiction, whatever it turns out to be. In that case, the man would do well to learn to write fiction, for one characteristic of what we now call nonfiction is the degree to which it has become narrative.

History and biography are two forms of nonfiction that seem rather clearly definable even at the end of hackwork definition. Let us imagine that we have just read a new book that combines a biography of George Washington with a history of the American Revolution. If such a work is nonfiction, and it is, what can we learn from it about the form?

We all think we know how George Washington lived and died and how the American Revolution worked out in recorded fact. Let us say we started to read the book because the publisher announced that the author had some newly researched information: we set out to learn something more on a subject we already know something about. To be pedagogically arbitrary, let us assume that the author has uncovered 10 new facts. He could have saved us a lot of time by issuing a memo that read, "In addition to what you already know here is a digest of 10 facts." If the author refuses to send us such a memo, we can still skip him and get the 10 facts from a sort of memo called "the book review."

Yet we do read the book. Many of us would read it even if it offered no new facts. Why do we choose to read about what we already know?

One reason for reading the book may be that it gives us a new experience of the facts. When we get to the chapters on Valley Forge, for example (and if the book is well written), we actually find ourselves doubting that Washington is going to pull through. We know that he did pull through, that the British were repulsed, and that the United States of America was born. Yet the author has so involved us in the contest of forces *he has chosen* that our feelings are caught up in anxiety and doubt in spite of our sure knowledge of the outcome.

History is not a recital of facts. It sets forth facts but it relates them to a contest of forces and it is the author who chooses that contest of forces. I once read an account of the American Revolution in a British textbook and I hardly recognized the war the author was describing. He had chosen a contest of forces that would never have occurred to me on this side of the recorded facts. As I recall, he saw the Revolution as a sort of smuggler's rebellion, its basic motive being the refusal of renegade Englishmen to pay their taxes to their sovereign.

With this much said, it may be possible to stop hacking and to try for some neater and more useful generalizations about the nature of nonfiction.

History, to begin with, is a style of writing. It is not what happened. Event is what happened. What happened, moreover, consisted of more events than could be recorded or, if recorded, dug out of the archives by any one man or group of men. History is a selection of events. In selecting his events the historian presupposes that he knows what is and what is not important.

The more likely truth is that he was conditioned to his choices before he began to write. A Jesuit writing a history of European civilization—even if he calls it a lay history—will almost certainly take some facts of church history to be important. A Marxist writing the same history may all but ignore the church while having much to say about the economy and about man-hours of labor. The Jesuit might see European history as a contest between the faith and anarchy; the

Marxist as a contest between a repressive class structure and a more desirable method of productive labor. I once read an account of the Roman Empire that ascribed its fall to the shortage of fodder for the imperial cavalry. By the time hay had to be brought from England, the writer claimed, Rome had so extended its supply line that it had overexposed itself to barbarian invasion. That plot never occurred to Gibbon, but it seems credible enough as plots go.

The contest of forces selected by any given historian is to him what a plot is to the novelist. History—and biography—must have a plot. A plot is intended to involve the reader emotionally. To do so it must seem credible. Credibility involves a willing suspension of disbelief.

Plot, involvement, credibility, willing suspension of disbelief—these are terms of old-fashioned criticism. They remain, of course, the basic characteristics of fiction and of drama. Facts, to be sure, have something to do with nonfiction, but nonfiction as a literary form (i.e., as distinct from tables of logarithms) manipulates our feelings, even in spite of the facts. In the act of reading our imaginary book about George Washington and the American Revolution we come to feel *as if* we were ourselves there, despite the sure knowledge, somewhere in our minds, that it is, say, 3 p.m., Wednesday, November 5, 1972, and that if we looked out the window we would be not at Valley Forge but on West 45th Street in New York City.

Like fiction, nonfiction as a literary form seeks to involve our feelings and to lead us to an emotional conclusion. As an interim definition, let me suggest that nonfiction is what becomes of a body of information when it falls into the hands of a man who would like to write a novel (or a short story) but who lacks faith in the scope of his own emotions, or who suspects he couldn't sell the stuff if he made fiction of it.

I may be back to hackwork in offering such a definition. It is true nevertheless that the genre we call nonfiction (and sometimes "the new nonfiction") is based on narrative techniques that are interchangeable with fiction. Lederer and Burdick, to cite a single example, originally wrote *The Ugly American* as nonfiction, ran into problems *after the publisher had accepted the book as nonfiction,* and reworked their material at the last minute dictating it to a battery of stenographers in the recast form of a novel. Whatever may be said for or against such timesaving methods of composition, the point is that the proper study of nonfiction is fiction.

Like fiction, nonfiction cannot be taught. The talented writer, however, can be usefully coached. The football coach cannot give a young man a body, nor speed, nor a basic sense of physical competitiveness, nor the will to play. If a young man comes to him with the right physical and mental endowments, however, the coach can probably show him how to make better use of what he has.

No writing coach can tell a would-be writer what to put on paper. The coaching begins after something has been written. It starts by showing him what to change in order to make the writing better. If the coach is sensitive and if the writer sees the point a second thing happens: the writer not only makes the change, but in making it takes a new attitude not only toward that piece of writing but, in some part, toward every future piece of writing. The writer may end up by throwing that particular piece in the waste basket. The change of attitude will still be in his head when he works on another piece. Every past piece of a man's writing enters into his next piece. As Theodore Roethke liked to put it, "What slips away provides."

The good writing coach is a provider. He is not a revelationist. If he suggests certain rules of thumb, he is likely to say, "These rules matter only because they cannot safely be violated by a writer who does not know they exist." Everything he suggests is tentative and empirical. The would-be writer must receive the suggestion, ponder it, and accept it only when it "makes sense" inside him. If he has some strong feeling against doing it in the way the coach suggests, he should reject it. The good coach wants him to. The coach is not a rewrite man, but a poker and prodder who hopes to bring the writer to recognize now, with the coach's help, what he might not recognize unaided for years to come. Whether early or late it is the writer himself, and only he, who can come to recognize what is right for him. He may be wrong for a time, he may be wrong forever and never write well, but only as he forms his own sense of recognition has he any chance of being right enough to matter to a good reader.

The changes a good coach can suggest will cover thousands—hundreds of thousands—of particulars from sentence structure to the basic plotting of the nonfiction material. At all times he will be trying to make the nonfiction writer's material—of which he himself may know only what he finds in the manuscript—more narrative. He may mention some matter of fact he happens to be aware of and suggest that the writer check it. Basically, he will be discussing not the facts, but plot, involvement, credibility, and the willing suspension of disbelief.

He will begin by assuming, as does the good historian, that good writing is not the recital of a mass of facts but an experience of selected facts. He will be talking fictional method to a writer with a body of information who is trying to form a style of communication.

He will recognize that a change of style is a change in the principle of selection that chooses the facts the nonfiction writer presents. Writers with a scientific turn of mind speak of finding the style—and the conclusions—implicit in the facts themselves.

But what is a fact? A fact, I will suggest, is something looked at. In many contexts it is what one chooses to look at in preference to looking at something else. To some extent, therefore, a fact is a function of the way of looking. A man is a way of looking. A nonfiction writer is a man in search of a style for his particular way of looking at the things he has chosen to look at. A style is what makes one man's way of looking visible to another.

In her *Silent Spring*, for example, Rachel Carson, a scholar with a body of information about the ecology, felt strongly about certain changes in the environment and wanted readers to share not only her information but her feelings. Dramatically, she plotted her information to the theme of bird song. Her plot worked. The readers of her book acquired some ecological information. More to the point they acquired an ecological concern they would not have been moved to by a coldly scientific recital of the facts. The style of Miss Carson's writing moves us to feeling and, therefore, to her way of looking. We "try on" her way of looking as one of our own possible ways of looking. In *Moby Dick*, Melville's style leads us to "try on" Ishmael's way of looking, and that, too, becomes one of our own ways of looking—and of feeling. One book is nonfiction and one is fiction, but both use essentially the same sort of stylistic persuasion.

There is no way of discussing nonfiction without discussing these things. I do not know what nonfiction is.

Some of our contestants on this show have prepared statements, others have said they would like to wait to hear your questions, and others have one or two things they would like to say. Why don't I simply start at my left, your right, and ask Louis Rubin. Have you something you would like to say?

Louis D. Rubin, Jr.:

When I was handed this topic of nonfiction, I was like John; I don't know what it is, either. It's like the lady who was very happy when she found out she's been talking prose all her life. I thought what I would try to do was to talk a little about creative writing programs in general involving what we all do: nonfiction, fiction, poetry, playwriting, and so forth and so on, because, for one reason, I can soul-belch a lot better about that, and I thought I ought to have my chance to do a little soul-belching.

The most candid words about the purpose of creative writing that I know were expressed some years ago by the late Ellen Glasgow. "All I want," she said, "is adulation." Now, there's some truth to that, but not too much. That's not really why we write, it's not even why we have creative writing programs. You tend to get very little adulation out of a creative writing program. The good writers you turn out all think it was their native genius, not your teaching, that made them successful, and the poor writers blame you for failing to appreciate them; and then you invite a British novelist to be writer-in-residence; it doesn't matter which one, any of them will do this very well, and he'll come over and take your money and drink your whiskey, and then go home and write an article ridiculing what you do and saying that creative writing programs are bad for literature. Of course, if I were a Briton, and I looked at the recent crop of British novelists who have been unspoiled by the teaching of creative writing, and then compared them with half a dozen or so American novelists who were spoiled by it, I think what I would do would be to go home and start some creative writing programs as fast as possible.

But to get to more serious things, why do people write fiction, nonfiction, poetry, why do I write? I have wondered about it sometimes. One may, if one wishes, view it as a messianic operation to praise the beautiful, to garland truth. On the other hand, we might prefer to go at it psychologically. We write because we were toliet-trained too early, or because all writers are neurotics trying to compensate for the inability to live successfully in the real world by creating one of their own. There's some truth to all of that; it might well be that if I had been able to get a curve ball over the plate in 1935, I would have given up writing, though I doubt it. Or if Ernest Hemingway had really been a tough enough guy with his fists back in Oak Park, he wouldn't have written about courage so much, but I don't think that's quite it. I don't think that writing is either a neurosis, though many writers, God knows, are neurotics, or a species of religious worship, though it is often made to appear so.

And since we are discussing literary creativity and creative writing programs, it might be worth speculating for a minute on what writing is. I think writing is a way of knowing, and those who write do so in order to find out what they know. That they get paid for it, that they can make things happen in society, in public life, that they will be noticed for having written well, all these are motives but are subordinate to the chief one, which is that of knowing. I write in order to find what I think or how I feel. I may disguise this in various ways, or perhaps a better way to say it, the attempt at knowing may take many different forms and shapes: nonfiction, fiction, poetry, drama, and so forth. But I think that when you get down to the root, to the common denominator that unites journalists and poets, scholars and novelists, biographers and pornographers, playwrights and political pundits, what you come down to is a common unwillingness to settle for one's experience of the documentation of the world without trying also to put it into order, to know what it means and how one feels about it. All the experience possible in the world is not enough to satisfy some people. They have to try to organize it on paper, in language. Why else would a Joseph Conrad take to writing sea stories, or Winston Churchill write history, or James Weldon Johnson write his autobiography? Was it because these people didn't live active enough lives, and so had to compensate for it with pen and paper? Hardly. It was because having done, and while doing, they wanted to figure out why and how. It's the same for a William Faulkner or an Emily Dickinson, an Edward Gibbon or a Finley Peter Dunne. Each of us has all the experience he can handle, whether a battlefield or a boudoir, lion-hunt or library, it doesn't matter. What we want to do is to discover and enunciate its meaning, its order, and that's why we write: to get finally to what we are—why we are here today, the teaching of writing, why do we do it, should we, can we?

I found myself, all during this meeting, in disagreement with what seemed to me to be a common assumption of almost every speaker that I heard, which is the idea that the object of teaching creative writing is to turn out writers. I don't think the principal goal of a creative writing program, whether in nonfiction, fiction, or poetry, is to turn out professional writers. Sometimes this happens. I suppose that in 20 years of doing it, I've been about as fortunate in that respect as the next person, but that's not the real reason why we do it, or why we should do it, I think. If that were our objective, turning out important writers—and goodness knows we have chosen a mighty inefficient way of attaining it, because, as everyone who teaches creative writing knows, the proportion of light to heat is pretty low for all of us everywhere—rather, I submit that what we are principally doing is helping young people to find out what they know in language, helping them to get at what they think and feel. We do this by encouragement, by criticism, by suggesting models, by holding them to techniques, by making them think about what it is they are trying to do when they write. There are various ways of various people, but the main thing is to help them discover the techniques whereby they can give order to what they think and feel. That's what we do, or try to do, and that's what we're after, and it doesn't matter, therefore, whether finally, out of our classes and our workshops and our conference come a few famous writers, successful writers, or even talented writers. If we get that, that's fine, and it's very satisfying, but it's not, and shouldn't be, our primary objective; we teach writing and we encourage young people who wish to write, because it's a way of helping them to understand themselves and their world, what they think about it, how they feel and why, and whether they become professionals at it doesn't finally matter. We teach because we feel that people are better off, better people, richer people, for having tried to apprehend their experience in language, and find out how hard that is to do. The knowledge, the wisdom, that they derive from that effort, will be of benefit to them no matter what they do afterward. So the question, it seems to me, is not whether we, as creative writing people, can create good writers; of course we can't--nor is it whether we can discourage good writers; we can't do that either, thank God. Rather, we can do something better than either of these things. We can help people to write. That's all the justification we need, and all that any teacher could possibly want. We can help people to understand their world. Thank you.

William J. Lederer:

I want you teachers to listen very closely, and get out your bandaid. You know, there are myths and traditions which hang on, which are in error. For example, for a thousand years, the human race has believed that female and male marry because they are in love, and modern research shows this is hogwash. Usually they marry because they're in heat, or they are neurotics, or they are lonesome, or for some such thing. There is a just as destructive, in my mind, hogwash about this stuff of fiction and nonfiction, that nonfiction is factual, and fiction is made up, and you talk of creative writing. The word create, as I just looked up in the big dictionary upstairs, means to make something out of nothing, and for the first time, or to produce a work of art along new or unconventional lines. Is this what you're teaching? What does art mean? According to the dictionary, it says, the power of performing or executing certain actions, especially as acquired by experience, study, or observation; or the faculty, usually expert, of performing or executing what is planned or devised, and what does it mean, to narrate? It's from the Latin, as John knows, meaning to make known, to tell or relate a happening. And what's a story? John, what's the origin? From *historia?* History. Story. History; it means a connected narrative, an account of an incident or event. All of these indicate things which have happened.

There is little difference between fiction and nonfiction, in style, material, or anything, with a few exceptions. In fiction, you have the advantage of a greater means of perception, of a greater variety. You can get into different people's heads; this you cannot do in nonfiction, except in your own head. In nonfiction, the reader usually associates the event with the specific people who are mentioned in it or the specific event. In fiction—now remember this—the reader tends to generalize and apply it to everybody. Nonfiction is more precise and requires far more discipline than does fiction. Fiction lets the author have the liberty of using discretion and getting rid of somebody who happens to block or to clutter the forward progress of the action. In nonfiction, you have to have him in there, and skillfully make him apply. But basically both fiction and nonfiction are reporting, not making stuff up, and placing people and events into an orderly progression. For example: *War and Peace* is reporting; you read Tolstoy's letters, he lets you know who everybody is in real life. So is *Anna Karenina*, so is *Madame Bovary*, so is *The Red and the Black*, so is *An American Tragedy*, so is *Robinson Crusoe*. I could go on all afternoon of great pieces of fiction which are really reporting, which have been just allowed into different means of perception. Now the theory, the thing of instructing, that fiction and poetry are the blessed events which come by a direct pipeline from the Muses, and nonfiction is hackwork—nothing could be more off. This belief is a product of the instructors who are teaching their students to be dilettantes, not producers. Now, just look; there is in 1972 31 times as much nonfiction out as fiction. There is almost 800 times as much nonfiction as poetry. Why is this the choice of readers? They prefer it in that order, and if you climb off your high horses and study it, I hope you'll learn it's because many writers take the mystique, which you teachers instill in them, of fiction and poetry, as a license for slovenly writing, and it bores the reader, and that's why they're not buying it. Good writing can compete with the visual on TV, and bad writing cannot, and most of the bad writing is fiction and poetry. Number 2: They prefer the nonfiction because the many fiction writers and poets have been persuaded by the instructors that they're so special, and so they become too fragile, too proud, too arrogant, too artsy-fartsy, to keep in touch with the filthy mob, as we who write both fiction and nonfiction I hope at least attempt. And when there is a story or an article that is very popular, it's looked at as inferior art, and Homer would not have ageed with that. Now, the teacher's task is not to say which is the higher and mightier, but to teach the student when the narration should be fiction or when it should be nonfiction, which will tell the story most effectively.

Now, John mentioned *The Ugly American*. We were two guys who needed dough. We had written *The Ugly* as nonfiction. It had been accepted by the Book-of-the-Month Club and the *Saturday Evening Post* and it was about to go into printing. There were 31 mimeographed copies of it. Bud and I wanted this to be a pretty good book. We spent 13 months with facts: Who got the money? Who was the bum? The dates, the names. We recalled the 31 mimeos from the Book-of-the-Month Club and the *Saturday Evening Post*, and the agents, the lawyers, and all over, to spend one week just to eliminate, if we could, a "the" here, an "a" here, to take an adjective and make it into an active verb over here. The first night, because we loved each other, we had the same thought, and we knew that *The Ugly American* was inappropriate as nonfiction, because people would think of it as specifically these guys only, and we wanted to make it that this was a general thing for Americans all over, and they would believe it more if it were fiction. So we had a tough decision. Here were two men with about 120,000 bucks on the line, and we both needed it, and we knew that in this instance, fiction was more effective, and so we did what any red-blooded Americans would do to make a decision, we got drunk. We burned all 31 manuscripts. In the morning, we had no book. We had six days, so we got stenographers, dictating machines, outlined it as fiction, and dictated in six days, but that's why it happened, and that's the end of my remarks.

Ciardi:

I have told people they would have an option of making a prepared statement or to wait for questions. Mr. Stegner would like to wait for questions. Your option, sir?

N. Scott Momaday:

I have a couple of brief things to say. I'm tempted to say, hell, I know what nonfiction is, but I really don't. A couple of things occurred to me, though, in this connection, and I jotted them down. I think that with respect to nonfiction, the writer is working within a dimension of reality, whatever that means; therefore, he must establish a point of view that is appropriate to that dimension, and it seems to me that there is a distinction to be made between fiction and nonfiction on that basis. I wrote a small book called *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, which is made up of legends, history, and memoir. As I got into that book and into the three voices of that book, I felt the need to make some basic distinctions, to establish these particular points of view. The distinctions, I found, were very difficult to make, and I finally concluded that they were more apparent than real. And so it occurs to me that perhaps fiction and nonfiction are closer together than is generally believed, especially at the level of the imagination. My friend Willie Morris, who was the editor of *Harper's* magazine, was talking to me one day about a well-written book of his called *North Toward Home.* We were talking about the particular problems of writing an autobiographical narrative, and he made an interesting statement. I asked him what some of the technical problems were, and in talking generally about autobiographical narrative, he said, "Oh, it's very nice, it's marvelous. What you must do is lie a lot." What he meant, I think, was that there is much room in autobiographical narrative, in some areas of nonfiction, for speculation. It is speculation which is not fact in the ordinary sense, but neither is it fiction. I believe that this speculation, which is an act of the imagination, is indispensable to the writing of nonfiction prose.

Ciardi:

Thank you, Scott. Josephine, do you want to say something?

Josephine Jacobsen:

Well, I haven't any prepared statement, but there are one or two things I would like to say, John. I think one rather interesting thing that we've been working towards in this conference, it seems to me, is a kind of breaking down of arbitrary divisions. I think some arbitrary divisions have taken rather a beating here, like the generation gap and the racial gap, and now I think the prose and fiction gap is taking a beating, and I'm very glad to see it. I think everybody here has been working to some extent toward the idea that these things are very closely interlocked, not only are there great elements of fiction in nonfiction prose, which John has gone into, but, of course, this tremendous amount of nonfiction in some of the best fiction, particularly where it deals—I was just thinking in terms of books written by three writers who I think are all here. A beautiful child's story called the *Owl in the Cedar Tree,* written by Scott Momaday—and all these books couldn't be more different—and the *Death of the Fox,* George Garrett's *Death of the Fox,* and *The Winds of War* by Herman Wouk. Now, obviously, all these books are fiction. The *Owl in the Cedar Tree* is a story, but at the same time, there is a tremendous substructure which lends the book a great deal of its charm and of its interest. You are learning verifiable and authentic facts that you trust about a Navajo childhood, about the mores, about the food, about the play-things, about the entire structure of life. In *The Winds of War,* you have this enormous substructure of meticulous political research, and in the *Death of the Fox,* which is even more unclassifiable, because I think it is poetry and history and fiction, you have not just masses of glutinous facts about Elizabethan and post-Elizabethan England, but you have a real basis of illumination about how people felt and thought and lived, which is not fictional, so that I do feel, very definitely, that this is a very arbitrary line, and I wouldn't know, really, where one begins and the other ends. Obviously, a book is more of one than it is of the other, but I do think it's an arbitrary distinction, and I would also like to say that I am so in sympathy with what Mr. Rubin has said about the purpose of teaching. I think this is a profoundly true statement, this idea that one of the most important aspects of it, if not the most, is helping a writer to understand what he means about himself and about life, and I think of Auden, who put it very trenchantly when he said, "How do I know what I mean till I see what I say?" and I think this is very true. Oh, there's one more thing I want to say. I told John I was going to quote him, and I do want to, and this ties in with exactly what we were saying. He has a wonderful phrase, and I hope I'm quoting you right, John, about a particular state of grace, and this state of grace is the grace of uncertainty. Am I right on this?

Ciardi:

Well, something of the sort.

Jacobsen:

I think this is a marvelous phrase. We've all been known to lapse from it, even John, occasionally, but I think the grace of uncertainty is a terrific thing.

Ciardi:

Ralph, may I wait just a minute? Wally Stegner has discovered he has something to say.

Wallace Stegner:

I thought I could keep still for a minute. I wanted to go for a moment back to the definition of history which John made in his opening remarks. History is a style of writing, a selection of events, stressing therefore the style and the function of the historian himself. That is, I think, a definition of history that I would myself accept and probably try to subscribe to in writing. It's not the only one, however, and since I've been doing a biography of Benny De Voto, and Benny

De Voto was a historian, a narrative historian, who tried, in his own words, to realize the far western experience as personal experience, to make that kind of fictional and sensuous contact. He wrote fiction—I mean he wrote history, in other words, like Parkman and not like one of the scientific historians who stem from Rank. And a lot of historians said his books were not history. Arthur Schlesinger, Sr., for instance, remarked that *The Year of Decision* was not history, it might be something good, but it wasn't history. All right, I don't care, I think Benny would have replied that those people who chose to pretend that history was a science, that it was a recitation of facts, and that those facts could be objectively ascertained and reported, were precisely the kinds of historians who didn't deserve to be read, because they didn't have any sense of style, and they didn't put into it the kinds of things he liked to see, they didn't realize it as personal experience. It struck me in going through those history books of De Voto's, which I think are germane to this discussion because he was one of the people who bent historical fashion toward the narrative and toward that personal experience side. They are books which in their structure have two elements that I never saw in history before these. One of them he called the test-boring, which is just that random sampling here and there through a body of historical experience. The other he called simultaneity, so that you get a book like *The Year of Decision* in which everything is happening at once, or the attempt is made insofar as it can be made, in prose, to represent it as happening at once, and a dozen, 12, 15, 20 stories are carried forward simultaneously. It's a very confusing kind of business; it made, on the other hand, a kind of exhilarating history book. The simultaneity is exactly what Frost was talking about when he called himself a synecdochist. All that an artist needs, Frost said, is samples, and the test-boring, the sample, is enough for De Voto's kind of historian. It's not enough for that kind of historian who conceives himself to be a scientist and who is reciting a chronological, careful body of facts with nice integuments, binders between the facts.

Actually, if you look at the style of De Voto's history, he corroborates what everybody here has been saying, that there isn't that much difference, or shouldn't be that much difference, between nonfiction and fiction. These are fictional devices, his form is artistic form, it's meant to prove something by the form itself. These histories are conceived like novels and executed like novels. The form of *The Year of Decision* or *Across the Wide Missouri* is much closer, let us say, to the form of Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* than it is to any chronological history. It plays tricks with time, it plays tricks with point of view, it adopts the internal points of view of characters in the action, it does all the kinds of things that history, traditionally, has not wanted to do, and for my part, I'm very glad it does. It makes a kind of marriage, which, until recently, I think, hasn't been made. That's all I want to say.

Ciardi:

Thank you, sir. Ralph?

Ralph Ellison:

Yes. Just before we get too carried away, and burn the distinctions between fiction and nonfiction, I'd like to say that I'm glad that some of the people who feel that there is no distinction aren't writing textbooks on anatomy or surgery or indeed writing me directions on how to put out a fire in the house. You know, we only have one human brain, and we have a language, and we try to communicate. The information is sent out in a common human way, and it is received in a common human way. So yes, one tries to get some of the same quality into a piece of nonfiction that we try to get into fiction, because there's only one brain, there's only one way of using language, basically; but there is a difference. In writing nonfiction, fact asserts a tyranny upon us which life asserts upon us. Therefore, out of a sheer regard for protecting the species, we deal with the tyranny of facts in a different way in nonfiction. In fiction, there is the possibility of the assertion of the human will, wherein you can reduce reality to a more completely dominated form. You can make it sing, you can make it eloquent, you can imprint it with the human personality even down to the last way the word is put on the page. These distinctions, I think, are built in. It is in the observation of these differences that we get various types of discipline. I think that should be said and thought about as we carry on this discussion.

Jacobsen:

I certainly agree with that, personally. Speaking for myself, I was not trying to break down the essential characteristics of fiction and nonfiction. Simply speaking of the fact that this marriage, probably for one of the doleful reasons that Mr. Lederer has outlined to us, this marriage does take place between them and they retain, I think, their absolutely different characteristics. The tyranny of fact is there, it's simply wedded, in some proportion, dominant or subdominant, to the fiction.

Rubin:

This difference between fact and fiction is something that I've thought about a good deal, and the trouble is that I do think that they are two different things. But when you get a particular example, you find that this encroaches on the other, and vice versa, but it seems to me that, for one thing, I think we read nonfiction and fiction differently. We enter into the work of nonfiction with a different set of expectations, a different convention between the author and the reader, than we do with fiction. For example, if I sit down and read a—let's say a biography of George Washington, I know that there was a George Washington. I know that the events that are being dealt with are events which happened. They really happened. Now, if in reading this, I come across something that—let's say the historian has George Washington thinking about something that happened to him a long time ago on a particular occasion—tends to jar me, because I know that there's no way that the author of the work of history could have known what George Washington was thinking at this particular moment. Now, when I read a work of fiction I don't make that kind of judgment at all; I'm looking at a different kind of logical consistency. I want what the novelist has his characters thinking and saying to be consistent with the development of the characterization and the scene that he's creating. Now, those are two different things, and in one case, the reliance is upon, directly, and without the intervening act of the imagination, the documentation of the world. In the other case, it's an internal logic, it's a logic of the work of art, which tells us that this should be and this could be and this must be, and I think that's an important distinction.

Ciardi:

Thank you, Louis. I think some marvelously important and marvelously felt things have been said here this afternoon. I'm thinking now about teaching, since that's the key of our conference here. I sense that we have opened some unanswerable questions, and therefore I think that we're getting at it. What is probably more important than to answer these questions is to see how richly we can raise them. I wonder if we can raise them by sitting here, after our anatomies are all exhausted? Why don't we stand up and stretch and take a 10-minute break, and think about some of the things that have been said, and then come back and see, not how to answer these questions, but how to carry them deeper into themselves. We'll have a Quaker meeting for 10 minutes.

May I have your attention, please? You're all too slow getting back; there'll be no recess tomorrow. I see by looking at the audience that those who did not want to ask questions have left. I assume that everybody that stayed wants to ask a question. A question here? Would you take the microphone and not start speaking until you have it before you, and would you address your question to a particular person if so inclined.

Audience:

I believe this morning, Mr. Stegner, you said you were going to make an announcement about a magazine. I wonder what became of that, was it lost in the rush to lunch?

Stegner:

I'll tell you what became of it. I left it up in the Deputy Librarian's office with my other papers at lunch. This was a paper left for me, an announcement to be made for the magazine *Fiction*, of which I remember only a certain number of details; the editor is Mr. McCaffrey, I believe, the subscription rate is $9.00 a year, the presumption is that this is going to be a new market for fiction, and I was asked to make those points clear. That's ad lib, and I've probably left out all the important details, but that's all I can remember at the moment.

Ciardi:

Let's see—question here, on the right?

Audience:

All that you left out, Mr. Stegner, was the address.

Stegner:

Yes, can you give it to me or announce it?

Audience:

Yes, it's Avenue Victor Hugo, P.O. Box 322, Manchester, Vt., and that's 05254, the zip, and this, a reference to this magazine was made in the Harvey Swados article in the *New York Times* two Sundays ago, to which reference has been made several times here. I really can't vouch anything about it, except that I did look it up in the Library of Congress here, and find it, and get the address. . . .

Ciardi:

All right, is there a question on this side? All right, we'll take one in the middle. Yes, sir. The gentleman in the—

Audience:

I'd like to raise two points, both of which are completely unrelated, so first I'll just state them and then you can deal with them however you want. The first one has to do with writing, and I'm taking into account what Mr. Lederer told us about *The Ugly American*. You said that first you wrote it as nonfiction, but you changed it to fiction because of the fact that you felt that the public wanted to be able to kind of have something more general, that leaving it as nonfiction would be leaving it too specific, that the characters, the events, everything would be considered as specific, but then you go on to tell us that nonfiction is, seems to be where the market is, that people are buying nonfiction books much more readily than they are buying fiction books. Now, to me, I sense somewhat of a contradiction in what you've been saying there, but what my estimation of the situation would be is that most readers want to read nonfiction because of the fact that it is specific, because of the fact that, whatever is being told, they can just assume that's the way it is, and with fiction, they do have to extend their minds, because fiction tends to be more complex; and that the material, therefore, of nonfiction, can be seen as being more simplistic only because of the fact that it is specific, so I wanted you to comment on that.

And the other point that I wanted to raise has to do with teaching, and that is whether or not you approve of using—the one thing that none of you mentioned in nonfiction, critical analysis, and the problem that I at least run into, and I assume that I'm not the only one, in teaching a writing course to very young writers who really have no idea how to go about it, is whether or not critical analysis is a viable means of getting into creative writing, because it seems that in all—most high schools, anyway, at least the high schools that my students have been to—they never do any creative writing there at all. About the only form of writing they ever do in the English classes is critical analysis of books. They get into a college course in writing, and I assign them something in critical analysis at the beginning just to get a feel of their writing, and find that they cannot even write a critical analysis paper yet, so I'm a little bit reluctant to take them on with creative writing until they have mastered the critical analysis, and I was wondering what your opinion on that is.

Ciardi:

Let me see if I can summarize those two questions; for Bill, I think you have your question to answer well in hand, but I'm not sure what you mean by critical analysis. Do you share my confusion, members of the panel, or—do you mean, for example, if I read a short story and point out something that doesn't work in this scene, and that you might try reworking the scene this way or that way to make it come out more effectively, that would be some sort of critical analysis, it's the kind of talk I would prefer to get to with a piece of writing, but if you mean some formal body of criticism, as a course in literary criticism, or some formal way of making a critical analysis, which do you mean: shop talk about the writing, or some system of applying criticism to a work?

Audience:
The first.

Ciardi:
The first; shop talk about writing. All right, so we—Bill, will you answer the first question, and then I'll ask for something to say on the second.

Lederer:
It was Bud and I who made the decision that we hoped that the public would accept what we had in there as applying to everybody, I mean to many of us. If we had had it with names and exactly in nonfiction, then these guys might have stood up and denied it, and so have made the public believe that everything in there was deniable, but if we had it in fiction, then it sort of floats over the whole nation, and that's how we looked at it. We had hoped that it might be an effective book. We were both angry, and we didn't wish to simply write a news story.

Stegner:
May I add something, or ask something? It seems to me, given Bill's answer, that the intention there is clearly nonfictional, that the intention is informational, the intention is propagandistic, the intention is somehow to move people to action, which doesn't strike me as being the intention of very much fiction, so that whether this is written as fiction or nonfiction is almost irrelevant. It's a nonfiction book whose strategy or tactics are fictional. Isn't that right?

Lederer:
Which applies to every novel, I believe.

Stegner:
No, no, no, no.

Ciardi:

Would anyone like to address the second question? Now, let me see if I have it straight, should we go into analyses of stories before beginning them, before beginning the writing, or should we have people write and try to criticize what they are doing, or alternatively, should we try to do both; that is, have people in a class analyzing some stories while writing others of their own? Is that a fair statement of the question? Sir?

Rubin:

I don't think it's an either/or proposition, and I furthermore think it has to do with the particular personality of the teacher and of the class. Now, the big job, it seems to me, in any creative writing class, and it doesn't matter whether you're teaching poetry or fiction, the big job, more than anything else, that I always find, is to make the student aware of the difference between his thinking and the organization, developing his thinking in language. Now, in the developing of the thing in language, he really gets down to what he thinks about something, but you have to show them that language is an artificial mode, that there is a difference between simply talking and working something out on a piece of paper so that somebody else can read it who doesn't hear the inflections of your voice and doesn't draw on your particular personality. Now, in order to make people aware of the essential artificiality of the writing process, you can do this by having them write something and analyze it in class, or you can have them read short stories or poems from a magazine or from a textbook and proceed to talk about those things. There's no one way to do it, but what you have to do in any case is to make them think about the medium that they're using, and however you can do that is a way to do it, I think.

Ciardi:

How often I've had students say about a passage that did not work, "But that's the way it happened," and the difficulty of getting them to understand the difference between what happened journalistically and what is being made to happen within the form, which involves establishment. For example, I heard a critic say once that it wasn't until he'd been writing for a number of years that D. H. Lawrence knew how to kill a character. Now, all you have to do to kill a character is open a newspaper and read that somebody shot him; but in a short story, it has to come out of forces that have been established, unless the crass casualty of the death is part of the commentary. There is a formalization, and certainly I think it's the responsibility of teachers to show that a medium is a formalization. For example, if you record, word for word, what is said in evidence in a court trial, you will not understand anything that is being said. You have to go through the formalization of conveying tones of voice, gestures, pauses, emphases; none of those are in a court stenographer's record. We were discussing before we met here an experience all of us have had of giving talks to an audience, having someone make a transcript and send them to us for adjustment, which means you have to rewrite a piece. If you read a paper at an audience, which I very, very seldom do, and I apologize for having done today, it doesn't work. You may say it to the audience, but then what you have said will not work on paper; it has to be rewritten for the page, it has to be resaid for saying. Those are formalizations; are we talking about the same thing, Louis?

Rubin:
I think so.

Ciardi:
Yes. Let's see, any questions on this side?

Lederer:
May I add a quickie?

Ciardi:
Yes, sir.

Lederer:
In reference to what's been made here, in my classes, I will not allow narrative prose to be read out loud. They have to look at it with their eyes, and so it's either projected on a screen or mimeoed, because it is so easy to deceive the ear, much easier than the eye.

Ciardi:
I want to make sure that I'm looking across all the room, are there any questions on this side? The gentleman just above you.

Audience:
This question may seem to be hostile, but it's not meant to be. I want to address it to Mrs. Jacobsen. I want to thank her for the conference, but I want to ask her, what was the rationale in including a panel discussion of nonfictional prose, but omitting from the entire conference any discussion of playwriting, of drama, and it just seemed

to me it's an extremely important part of creative writing, and I was wondering what the rationale that went into the decision to omit it?

Jacobsen:

Well, I'm going to give a very shabby example of passing the buck on that question, and say, to begin with, that though I would like to have had the credit for organizing the themes taken up by the conference, actually I did not organize them. On the other hand, I would say that, had I done so, I don't know that in this regard it would have been any different. I happen to be passionately interested in the theater. I am, actually, in general, more interested in the writing of the theater than I am in the writing of nonfiction prose. However, you will appreciate that, when you have a two-day conference, and you have the multiplicity of things that you could talk about, the theater is such a stimulating, is such a wide, is such a tremendous subject, that I really think that if we had tried to get it in—after all, that comes under the head, if you will, of fiction—if we had tried to get into that as a separate subject, I think we would have to have had a whole extra day, certainly a whole extra half a day, so that necessarily, when you have this kind of a conference, the omissions are very painful, there are a great many omissions. I can think of a number of things that I wish we could have talked about; so that I can only say that I think it's a question of concentrating the time that you've got to the best of your ability, and I think that is what we tried to do. I wish we had been able to say something about playwriting. I think it's one of the most interesting fields of writing today in America, and I'm very sorry we didn't, but I think it was a question of concentration and of time. We originally thought that we might have a three-day conference, actually, and then, for many reasons, we felt that this was a mistake, and for the reasons of the panelists' convenience and many other reasons, that we would have to concentrate it in two days, and that is the best answer I can give you.

Ciardi:

Thank you, Josephine. Is there a question on this side? This gentleman toward the rear? Oh—Bill Smith. That's not a gentleman.

William Jay Smith:

Well, I'd like to call attention to the fact that the conference now has gone on for two days, and nobody on any of the panels has said anything about the term *creative writing*. I wonder if that means that you approve of that term. Some years ago, when I was at Williams College, I used to teach a course called Composition, and it had been called that for 25 years, and I went away for one year, and came back and it was called Creative Writing, and I said, "Well, why can't we just call it Composition, call it Writing, but not Creative Writing?" I was reminded of this when I read of an interview with Peggy Cannon, who is a *House Beautiful* editor, who interviewed Alice B. Toklas, and said, "Miss Toklas, how do you feel about creative cookery?" and Miss Toklas said, "And what might that be?" and I feel the same way about *creative writing*. Writing is either good or bad writing, or it's technical writing, or it's typewriting, but why should it be called *creative writing?* I discovered that this term was first used by Ralph Waldo Emerson, who is responsible for a lot of terrible things, and I'd like to have the opinion of the panel.

Ciardi:

May I say that the point was raised at the very first panel meeting. Richard Eberhart was especially unhappy about the term; he wanted to say *imaginative writing*. I'm not sure I'm happy about *imaginative writing*, I think I'd like to go for just *writing*, but I don't think any of us are very happy about being *creative writers*. It's a term that the college catalogs have adopted, and I'd certainly recommend that it be removed, that they should be called *writers' workshops*.

Jacobsen:

John took the words out of my mouth; I was just going to say that Richard Eberhart had addressed himself with great feeling to this very early in the conference, Bill.

Smith:

I apologize, then.

Jacobsen:

No, no, I think you have an excellent point, but it was raised.

Ciardi:

Is there a question in the middle; sir?

Lederer:

Narrative prose.

Ciardi:

Well, how do you include poetry in a program called *Narrative Prose?* Why not *Writing*, that seems to cover everything. I suppose the next step would be *soul-searching writing* or *beautiful writing*. There's a question in the middle section here, yes, sir.

Audience:

I would like Mr. Momaday to elaborate on two terms he used: the terms *lying* and *speculation* in reference to nonfiction writing.

Momaday:

I don't know to what extent I can elaborate. In quoting Willie Morris' statement to me that in writing an autobiographical narrative one has to lie a lot, I was venturing the opinion that what I think he meant was that he was making the distinction that I wanted to suggest between fiction and nonfiction. He was clearly working out of a dimension of reality, he was working with the facts of his life, but he was also free, I think, to make transitions, to speculate about the nature of that reality, where he did not have the facts close at hand. And this seems to me a very real and exciting part of writing of that kind. I think it is a matter of speculation in that if you don't know what the facts are, then you are free and obliged to venture what they might be, might have been. It seems to me that that's a real dimension within the process of writing, and it verges upon what we think of as fiction, I think, but there is a distinction that needs to be made.

Stegner:

May I add one word, in Kitty Bowen's name. Mrs. Bowen was supposed to be here today, but is seriously ill. She would have quoted to you, I think, Bernard De Voto in this issue, because at one point he gave her some advice about this very point: what do you do with facts about a biographee's life when you aren't sure of the facts, but you want to speculate about them. You think it's worthwhile to make some kind of guess at what might have been going through the mind; at the same time, you don't want to invent. "Put it in the subjunctive," Benny said.

Ciardi:

Nice detail. See, that's the kind of beautiful detail I think a coach knows where to slip in in the right place. It can solve so many problems. I'd like to say that I think poetry lies its way to the truth. I think that's what Marianne Moore had to say when she said, "There must be imaginary gardens with real toads in them." Obviously, a man who specializes in biology of toads could tell you more factual things about toads, he doesn't use them in that way. Now, I've been trying to represent the room; this section's a little larger, is there a question on—oh, sorry, sorry, Ralph.

Ellison:

Well, to the last question, it occurs to me that, especially when an autobiography is being written, the writer has to structure, he has to give form to his experiences, but he also finds himself in the predicament of not being absolutely lucid. We don't live in a state of lucidity. We discover. One reason we write is that we get a second chance, and we contemplate, we see the dimensions of an experience, the significance of a gesture, the radiance of a condition of the weather. This is what writing is about, it's a recapturing, and reduction to form of all this, in quotes, "formlessness," of experience. So, yes, the imagination works there, and it lies, but it lies in the direction of extending the meaning of reality, and that gets us back to truth and redeems those of us who write fiction who are privileged or at least we used to be.

Ciardi:

I certainly think that all serious writing achieves something like—in its experience, not in its statement—achieves in its experience something like a lucidity of insight, but that if it doesn't at least resonate some obscurities along the way, it is lying, because we are obscure to ourselves if we conceive ourselves deeply enough, and I'm not talking about obfuscation. I'm talking about the fact that we are not clear about ourselves if we are honest. One of the most obscure books in the world, I think, is the Bible. It's full of resonant mortal obscurities—not unintelligibility, but obscurity—and somehow, through that experience of ambivalence and obscurity and uncertainty, there can come a moment of lucid insight. And I think that's the mark of really good writing, seriously taken. Is there another question in the center section; yes, sir?

Audience:

This sort of relates to the question that was asked Mr. Momaday, and that Mr. Ellison responded to. What do you think of the diary as a literary genre in the sense of discussing autobiography, and how would you relate that to the sense of writing history? People say that when you write history you have to be factual; but you find that, in writing history, the diary is often used as a primary source, is considered a thing that you can base history on. But we often find that people lie their way to the truth through a diary, also.

Ciardi:

Did you all hear the question?

Momaday:

Was it directed to me? I have a very high regard for that activity, the business of writing a diary, keeping a journal, I think it can be as valid a form as any of the others we're talking about. I think there probably are fewer—I don't know—I keep a journal; I don't think of it as being something that I want to polish in the same way that I might polish a novel, but I think it is a valid form of writing, and I have to great deal of respect for it. I think you can talk about letters, too, in the same way; it's another very valid form of writing, or ought to be.

Rubin:

On this business of autobiography. The writer who is attempting to tell in autobiography his own story, his loyalty and the imaginative, formal principle under which he is working is: this happened to me, this is what I thought, this is what I now think, of what happened to me then. Now, frequently, the writer can, in an autobiography, give himself thoughts which, if you know something about the writer through biography, he couldn't possibly have had at that time, and you could say, well, isn't that fiction? No, because finally, it seems to me, finally, the imaginative ordering of the work is that it happened, and if the autobiographer says, "As I walked down Chestnut Street, I thought of this and I thought of that and I thought of this and I thought of that," if what he has himself thinking, if what he says he was thinking about, does not square in the reader's mind with what is probable in terms of what actually could have happened in his life, we'll draw back. And that's different from fiction, because then, it's not whether it could have happened in life, but whether it could have happened in terms of the imaginative development of a character. Now the difference gets very fuzzy, but I think it is different, and I think you read it differently.

Ciardi:

I'd like to say one very brief thing. Twice, I've started to write an autobiography, and had to give up. I couldn't figure out the plot. I mean that seriously. I don't see how you can write unless you pick a contest of forces, and I'm so schizoid or so fragmented, or the world is, I can't keep a set of conflicts that seem to be coherent. I wake up in the morning, and say, "Who am I today?"

John C. Broderick:

Mr. Ciardi?

Ciardi:

Yes, sir.

Broderick:

I have one announcement that perhaps should have been made before the break, but let me make it now. There will be, tomorrow morning at 10 o'clock, in this same auditorium, the annual meeting of the Associated Writing Programs, and all persons who have been in attendance at this meeting, this symposium, are invited to attend.

Ciardi:

In this hall, yes. I have to take an 8:40 plane, so I can't; but I hope some of you can. Yes, sir. Could we have a microphone here?

Audience:

Let me address this to Mr. Ciardi, though I welcome the response of all the panel, and I, too, like this gentleman, mean not to be hostile, but rather to direct the thrust of the conference more to what I think is its main concern, namely, the matter of the teaching of creative writing. It may be all right to take the old challenge formula of "do I really need to lay an egg, you know, to tell a bad one?"

Ciardi:

I'm sorry, I can't hear.

Audience:

I say, may be to take, as a beginning, the old challenge formula of "do I need to be able to lay an egg to recognize a bad one?" I'd like to ask whether, really, the teacher of creative writing, does he need, necessarily, to be a practicing writer himself, to teach creative writing? Indeed, all of you panelists have very prominent positions as teachers of, or directors of the teaching of, creative writing, but the fact is, you're also very established professional writers, too. Now, have we all not all known very effective teachers of creative writing who themselves were most miserable or unproductive writers themselves? I'd just like to know your opinion, do I really need to be able to lay an egg to cultivate chickens who lay more and better and bigger eggs? Is there a place in the profession of teaching creative writing for those people who are not writers themselves? Is the role of the teacher really much different from that of the editor, especially if we're talking in terms of audience and even marketability and then of craft in its relationship to that audience and market? Thank you.

Ciardi:

I think one of the great teachers I have had was a man who did not write, did not think of himself as a writer, Roy W. Coughton at

Michigan, who for many years directed all the writing programs there, and who administered the Hopwood Awards program and established, I think, a very far-reaching creative writing program at Michigan. I can't remember a thing Roy Coughton ever said. His seminars were a torment of boredom that I had to go through because I loved the man, but when we met to discuss a piece of writing, he had an infallible finger. It was some sort of mystique he had. We would look at the manuscript side by side, and his finger would begin to weave in the air, and by the time it fell on the page, I already knew where it was going to fall, and somehow—all I can remember is his finger. It was an uncanny finger coming down, but I think he was great—he always knew where to put that finger. As far as I know, he wrote nothing—a report or two—but I think of him as one of the great writing teachers. No, obviously, it's not essential, but I'd like to add one other thing. I don't think any one teacher is enough. I think a man should subject himself to one person's point of view, and later another, and later another, and perhaps later turn around and say, "I thought that guy was so good; he's a jerk," and build up his own view in taking many opposing opinions. I think this is one of the marvelous things of the program at Iowa, for example; that many, many teachers are available; I guess they're all professional writers, I don't see why they would need to be, but the climate, too, of bringing together a lot of good young writers; I think the group is absolutely essential.

I am no longer the director of the Bread Loaf Conference, but I think the secret of Bread Loaf's success, and I think it has had a success, is isolation. For two weeks, there is absolutely nothing to do but immerse yourself, in no particular order, although there is an order to it, in intense talk with writers, with no part of the world interfering. I don't recommend that as a life, but as a two-week hysteria in which you come out supersaturated, hung over, exhausted, and on the point of a nervous collapse. I think it's a marvelous piece of shock therapy; we have had no writers at Bread Loaf, no teachers at Bread Loaf, who did not write themselves, but a number of editors. William Sloane has written some fiction, but he is primarily an editor, and I think he has an uncanny instinct as an editor for telling people how to improve certain kinds of writing. In answer to your question, no, I don't think it's essential that the teacher be a writer himself, but how do you convince the dean that you're qualified to write if you haven't written anything? Louis?

Rubin:

I agree with you completely; I want to bring up one of the great creative writing teachers, a man who died a few weeks ago, and this was William Blackburn at Duke, and William Blackburn, a Ph.D.—I think he was an Elizabethan scholar—and up until his last years at Duke, his work in creative writing was at best tolerated, if I may say so, by a good many of his colleagues in the department, and William Blackburn turned out the following writers: William Styron, Reynolds Price, the late Mack Hyman, Fred Chappell, Wallace Coffman, several others I can't recall. He was a master at it. I often wondered how he did it. Blackburn didn't write fiction. In fact, the few times that I've talked with Blackburn about fiction, I didn't have the impression that Blackburn was a master at understanding the craft, and so forth and so on, and yet, again and again, he had these very successful writing classes, successful in that hundreds of students took them over the years, and of those students, a few of them actually became well-known writers. And I think Blackburn offered his students something that we haven't talked about very much because, really, there's no way you can talk about it, because either you've got it or you haven't. Blackburn offered his students the understanding, the encouragement, and above all, the example, of a man whom they could respect as a man of sympathy, understanding, character, who thought that writing was a very, very, very important thing, it was a noble craft, that it was worth doing, and that's why those people, some of them became writers rather than economists, and so forth and so on. This is a *tertium quid,* or whatever you want to call it. You can't just put this in a program, you can't build it in; it either happens or it doesn't.

But let me give another example of this. Another great writing teacher who has been on our program, Elliott Coleman at Johns Hopkins. Now, maybe Elliott will forgive me if I say that Elliott—he was my teacher, but his claims to fame are much better than that, I assure you, that's why he's here—he was John Barth's teacher, and a few others. Elliott wasn't particularly good at saying, "Well, now, you want to develop this a little better," or, "These lines don't work," or, "Why don't you do this, or do"—Elliott could do these things, but he couldn't do them as well as a lot of other people I know, and yet Elliott was and is a marvelous creative writing teacher. He was saying at lunch today, "I haven't been teaching very well lately." Well, Elliott doesn't have to teach very well; all he has to do is be Elliott Coleman. That is to say, to be a man that young men and women who want to write can show their things to, can respect the fact that he's interested in them, and just derive some pride and satisfaction in writing by that man's interest and that man's example, and if a creative writing program has this, it may not be the only thing, you may be able to do it without it, but if a creative writing program has this, it doesn't matter too much whether the teacher is a professional writer or not a professional writer.

Jacobsen:

I want to correct an error of my own. I have committed a piece of fiction here this afternoon. The *Owl in the Cedar Tree* was indeed written by N. Scott Momaday, but it was this N. Scott Momaday's mother, and not our panelist. He says he wishes he had written it.

Ciardi:

Let's see, I think we're over on this side. Question on this—on the right? All right, we'll leave the Tories, let's go to the Liberals in the middle, yes. The Coalition government's in the middle, isn't it?

Audience:

I'd like to know if there's many of the panel members, if Mr. Ciardi would care to discuss it, would give an opinion on the grading system. Do you think grades should be abolished, should they be continued, should they be changed?

Ciardi:

I will take a risk, and say that all of us wish it could be pass–fail. Any disagreements? I don't see how you can give a grade in creative writing. It's either A or F if you really want to get technical about it, but I think you can do some other things. For example, you can give the students a selection of short stories that you think are good samplings, an anthology, and have them underline, mark in red pencil, the way students do, law students do, red pencils, green ones, blue ones, color code: say, mark every scene in red in the margin, so they'd know where the scene begins and where the scene ends. In between the red markings on the margin, at least in the formal novel, they've got to have some sort of transitional material, and that can be color-coded. They might color-code interior dialogue, they might color-code dialogue and so forth, so that when they want to see examples of how different people do this, they can flip through, and read all the green passages or all the red ones or all the yellow ones, which will not teach them how to write, but it might make them better readers, which is one of the functions of one of these courses. Because, you see, the way the English departments are organized today, it's a conference of musicologists and piano players, and musicologists don't have much to say to piano players, and piano players do have something to say to musicologists, but the Ph.D. system, in this analogy, turns out musicologists, and the writing workshops try to turn out people who have something to do with the 88 keys and their 10 fingers and their pedaling feet, or maybe the analogy is between jockeying and veterinarianism. We have a faculty of veterinarians; we need a few jockeys around so that another view will be taken of the horse.

Lederer:

In the class I've had in professional writing, I let them know that what they do in my class, unless it is published and paid for, they fail, and this makes them time-bound. They know they've got to crank out, in two semesters, and it eliminates those who really don't have an interest in it, and I press them and mention that my class is *the* class and everything else in their lives, including their wives, is ancillary.

Ciardi:

That, of course, presumes that you can select them, and I think that distinction has to be made, too. When I was teaching at Harvard, I had to have manuscripts from students, and I selected them on the basis of their manuscripts. Now, if you have to take everything that comes, you have to teach in a different way than if you're allowed to select them for some aptitude. But if, for example, I were teaching a class in oil painting, I could legitimately ask to see your sketchbook before I would admit you; and if you had no sketchbook, that would be evidence that you were not ready to be admitted. Now, in some places you can do that and in others you can't, and I think you have those two categories to worry about. Let's see—the question on the left? Yes, sir.

Audience:

A little while back this afternoon, it seemed to me that there was some agreement on the panel that there was a drastic division between speech as one form of communication and writing as another form of communication, as if there were no connection between the two; whereas my own experience as a teacher is, and of many teachers I've worked with, that it is when the student discovers the connection between physical voice and writing that the student really begins to write. That's when clarity comes in, when perception comes in, and when imagination comes in, which perhaps shouldn't be so surprising, because the physical voice is what the person dreams with, or imagines with, or talks to someone else with, and so forth. But most education in schools does make most students believe that there is this language of school, which is writing, and then there is this other language outside of school, which is the language with which they really express their feelings, what they have to say, and anything that is really important to them. The person discovering a voice and finding that it is the way to writing, seems to hold also for those who are so-called well prepared. I assume even those who would be entering some of your advanced classes. Well, actually, it's not so undocumented. I've just written a rather long piece which was handed out by the AWP [Associated Writing Programs] recently in which this is a central premise, but I wondered if there were any experience in your classrooms of a connection between physical voice and writing, or if it is regarded by both students and faculty as being two separate forms of communication? Sometimes a student has written something which is very sketchy, you ask him to talk about it, and all of a sudden this very wonderful story begins to come out. Why?

Ciardi:
Yes, well, I think the question is clear.

Audience:
It goes for the teaching of English and of writing all over the country.

Ciardi:
I say, I think the question is clear, and I will take a chance at the answer, see if anyone wants to disagree. Obviously, in good writing, there is a very deeply felt connection between the idiom of the time and articulation. I think the point that was being made earlier was that speech is one formal convention and writing is another formal convention, and that in order to convey speech as it was actually spoken, a transcript is not necessary. Certain formal conventions are necessary on the page to make it sound like speech. Is that what we were saying earlier? Well, if not, then, we have just achieved another agreement.

Audience:
[Inaudible on tape]

Ciardi:
And so does writing. I was simply mentioning an experience we have all had of addressing an audience. What was effective as oral presentation, taken down by a stenographer and set down on a page, always

turns out to be bad reading. It requires some changing of the conventions to say the same thing on paper; not a different thing, not a fancy thing, not a thing removed from the voice, but to make the voice apparent to the eye.

Audience:

Right. Do you think the teacher should concentrate on developing that relationship between the two [inaudible on tape]?

Ciardi:

I don't know. Does anyone have any—

Ellison:

It depends upon the teacher.

Ciardi:

Yes, I think it would.

Lederer:

The technique which we've been experimenting on is after the student has his thing completed, we make him record it on a recorder, and then play it and listen, and this often is helpful.

Ciardi:

I certainly would want anybody who's writing poetry to read it aloud to himself, because often in reading it aloud from the page you see some rather absurd things you said that might be passed over in the business of the paper. Let's see, I think we have time, perhaps, for two more questions. One on this side? One in the middle? Yes, sir.

Audience:

One of the most successful writing programs in the country is the one at the University of Oklahoma, which works from a different context. The leader of it is Foster Harris, and he's turned out many very successful writers, and it works from the formula idea. He starts them off with basic patterns of plot, and, although some of them even start with things like *True Story* and *Modern Romance,* confessionals, to learn technique, some have transcended this, and gone on, like Marilyn Harris, who's one of our finer younger writers, I believe, and William Brinkley, and Weldon Hilt, who did *Wraith;* the products from that school have been extremely fine lately, I think. Now, I would like you to comment on the idea of that school of professional writers. They term their writing professional writing, and work from the whole idea of technique. Would you comment on that?

Ciardi:

I'm not sure I understand the question. What is it you would like—

Audience:

Well, formula writing. Starting off and strictly working with techniques, basic patterns of plot, for instance, and the whole school is worked this way, starting from this standpoint rather than just coming in and writing.

Ciardi:

In other words, instead of being asked to express the beauty of your soul, you're required to go through certain formulae, patterns, methods, formalizations.

Audience:

That's right, that's right.

Ciardi:

And to master them.

Rubin:

I know a little about that Oklahoma program, not very much. It's been operating for a number of years, and when I was a graduate student in Elliott Coleman's program, we had someone from that program who had done his undergraduate work, and it is pretty much—or it was at that time—it was pretty much a program designed specifically for, and with the intention of creating, of preparing writers for the commercial market. At that time, a type of magazine that doesn't exist any more, the pulps, or the slicks, as they called them, most of those magazines have gone; and I think that probably from that standpoint, the program out there was as successful as any of a number of others which were doing the same thing, and maybe more successful than most. Unfortunately, that kind of very practical program, if you tried to operate it in that way now, there wouldn't be any place to sell these things, so you'd have to do with television scripts or magazines like *True Story* and so forth and so on. I would say that that is a highly specialized kind of thing and well worth doing, and I don't think that creative writing teachers can kill writers, no matter what they do to them, if they're any good; I really don't. I think I've had a few writers come up from me, that if I could have killed them, they would have died, and I can conceive perfectly well of almost any writer coming through that kind of discipline as well as another kind, and achieving what he wants to do. It wouldn't be the way I'd do it, but evidently it worked pretty well out there.

Ciardi:

Well, let me see if I can summarize it. I feel that any student who will allow me to abuse him could learn something, could be made to learn something. The trouble is, where do you find students who will let you abuse them? This is a permissive generation, they're all too beautiful to be abused. The coach can abuse them, he can wear them out during scrimmages and so forth, but I can't ask for that much effort, they won't give it, so I go home and do it myself. I started earlier with Wallace Stegner's statement that "a writer learns his craft through millions of particulars." That lovely detail he quoted from De Voto. In this situation, shift to the subjunctive. Knowing when to say what, which one of those millions of things, is what makes you a writing coach. It needn't be the ability to write yourself, but to recognize what device you need for a situation because it is a formality. Writing is an illusion on paper, and it has to be mastered. It has tricks to it if you want to call them tricks. Every time Robert Frost spoke of his technical tricks, some of the beautiful ladies in the audience acted a little hysterical. They'd say, "But Mr. Frost, when you're writing one of your beautiful poems, certainly you're not thinking about technical tricks." And he'd lean forward and say, "I revel in 'em." I think we have time for one more question.

Audience:

A general question to the whole panel, respond if you will. In an age that seems so ripe for it, why is there so little satire being written?

Ciardi:

I will take a shot at that question. Satire functions in a society that has norms. A subject for satire is identified by its distance from the accepted norm. What is a norm? How do you get distant enough from it to start being interesting and to be satirical? How do you satirize any TV program? You reproduce it. How do you satirize a political speech? You don't burlesque it, you reproduce it. Now, Pope could write satire, simply because he was so sure there was a right norm for the behavior of an intellectual gentleman. But how do you satirize Allen Ginsberg? You can't; you have to take him seriously, or hate him, and you mustn't hate him, so you're forced to take him seriously. Any remarks on satire?

Ellison:

Well, I think that the mode keeps cropping up, and I think that if you read some of those people who describe themselves as the new black writers, you'll find that satire is a mode which turns up naturally. I agree that satire depends upon a norm, and we do have a norm. It's the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and we're always moving toward satire as we compare our actions with our assertions. The other side of it, of course, is that Americans must move, finally, towards satire in order to accept ourselves, our diverse selves, our general absurdity as people here trying to make a thing work.

Ciardi:

Well, Ralph, aren't you talking about the ironic view now?

Ellison:

Well, I'm not talking simply about irony, irony is there, but satire is inescapable. You just said it, you know: you listen to a politician carefully and you think about reality and certainly, you know, you're cracking up, and then you want to go get your gun; but it's built in.

Stegner:

On this subject of satire, I have a way of letting the customer have the last word. This is a page from a manuscript which I happened to bring along in my briefcase, and it has to do with writing teachers and writing students; it also has to do with norms, it has to do with a number of things, and if you'll pardon me, I'd like to read you a page. This is an interview, out of a story, between a writing teacher and one of his pupils. It happens to be about fiction, but we can work it into a nonfiction program. This is the student speaking:

> "Like I'm not pissed you didn't dig it," Arrington said, "only just a little sad, you know, disappointed that you missed the point. I don't get uptight if people don't dig my stuff, just as long as they see what I'm doing, because I've been writing for a long time, man, and I mean, like, I know I can write without people having to tell me all the time my stuff's great. But the thing is, here you didn't read it right, and of course it's going to sound like shit."
>
> Marlow began turning pages in a half-hearted attempt to remind himself of their contents, saw only sentence fragments, typos, the stained imprint of a coffee cup, the alliterative gibberish of what he had come to describe as Student Submission #1, The Road Map of My Mind. He contemplated contesting Arrington's claim that he was a writer, and reminding him of Malcolm Cowley's remark that a writer was somebody with readers. But he knew that would lead to Student Defense #3, "I don't write for readers, man, I write for myself." So after what he thought was an acceptable pause for reinvestigation, he handed the manuscript back.

"I don't read you at all," he said. "I look at nine and a half pages of unpunctuated, uncapitalized, misspelled nonsense that is devoid of plot, ideas, characters, setting, focus, reference, form, content, you name it. There's nothing here but words; words I can read in a dictionary. What do you want me to say about it?"

"Oh, man," Arrington groaned, "not words, man, word patterns: the warp and woof of word texture." Marlow, who had had nothing but two cups of coffee and three cigarettes all morning, offered only a sigh. "I mean, of course there's no plot or characters, that's old shit, man, really, Henry James shit, you know? Where this stuff here is like you say, words, just a head talkin' beautiful words, makin' images, man, spinning a tapestry out of threads of words. You're not supposed to understand it, like, with your mind or anything, you're supposed to groove on it, like, it's a different form of communication, right, it's nonlinear. You gut-respond, in an organic kind of way. It's definitely a different trip."

Ciardi:

This trip is hereby adjourned.

Other Publications on Literature Issued by the Library of Congress

These publications, based on lectures presented at the Library of Congress, may be purchased from the Superintendent of Documents, Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 20402. When ordering, please provide the title, date of publication, and identifying number (i.e., LC 29.9:H55), and enclose payment.

American Poetry at Mid-Century. 1958. 49 p. Reprinted in *Literary Lectures.*
New Poets and Old Muses, by John Crowe Ransom. The Present State of Poetry, by Delmore Schwartz. The Two Knowledges, by John Hall Wheelock.

Anni Mirabiles, 1921-1925: Reason in the Madness of Letters, by Richard P. Blackmur. 1956. 55 p. Reprinted in *Literary Lectures.*
The Great Grasp of Unreason. The Techniques of Trouble. Irregular Metaphysics. Contemplation.

Anniversary Lectures, 1959. 1959. 56 p. LC 29.9:H55. 75 cents. Also reprinted in *Literary Lectures.*
Robert Burns, by Robert S. Hillyer. The House of Poe, by Richard Wilbur. Alfred Edward Housman, by Cleanth Brooks.

The Art of History. Two Lectures. 1967. 38 p. LC 29.9:N41. 60 cents.
The Old History and the New, by Allan Nevins. Biography, History, and the Writing of Books, by Catherine Drinker Bowen.
Carl Sandburg, by Mark Van Doren. With a bibliography of Sandburg materials in the collections of the Library of Congress. 1969. 83 p. LC 29.9:V28. $1.

Chaos and Control in Poetry; a Lecture, by Stephen Spender. 1966. 14 p. LC 29.9:SP3/2. 55 cents.

Dante Alighieri. Three Lectures. 1965. 53 p. Out of print.

The Interest in Dante Shown by Nineteenth-Century American Men of Letters, by J. Chesley Mathews. On Reading Dante in 1965: the *Divine Comedy* as a "Bridge Across Time," by Francis Fergusson. The Relevance of the *Inferno,* by John Ciardi.

Edwin Arlington Robinson; a Reappraisal, by Louis Untermeyer. With a bibliography. 1963. 39 p. Reprinted in *Literary Lectures.*

French and German Letters Today. 1960. 53 p. Reprinted in *Literary Lectures.*

Lines of Force in French Poetry, by Pierre Emmanuel. Latest Trends in French Prose, by Alain Bosquet. Crossing the Zero Point: German Literature Since World War II, by Hans Egon Holthusen. The Modern German Mind: The Legacy of Nietzsche, by Erich Heller.

From Poe to Valéry, by T. S. Eliot. 1949. 16 p. Reprinted in *Literary Lectures.*

George Bernard Shaw, Man of the Century, by Archibald Henderson. 1957. 15 p. Reprinted in *Literary Lectures.*

Germany and the Germans, by Thomas Mann. 1946. 20 p. Reprinted in *Literary Lectures.*

Goethe and Democracy, by Thomas Mann. 1950. 28 p. Reprinted in *Literary Lectures.*

The Imagination in the Modern World. Three Lectures, by Stephen Spender. 1962. 40 p. Reprinted in *Literary Lectures.*

The Imagination as Verb. The Organic, the Orchidaceous, the Intellectualized. Imagination Means Individuation.

Literary Lectures, Presented at the Library of Congress. 1973. 602 p. LC 1.14:L71. $8.50.

Reprints of 37 lectures on literature.

Louise Bogan: A Woman's Words, by William Jay Smith. With a bibliography. 1971. 81 p. LC 1.14:Sm6. 95 cents.

Metaphor as Pure Adventure, by James Dickey. 1968. 20 p. LC 1.14:D55/2. 25 cents.

National Poetry Festival, Held in the Library of Congress, October 22-24, 1962: Proceedings. 1964. 367 p. LC 2.2:P75/6. $1.50.

Nietzsche's Philosophy in the Light of Contemporary Events, by Thomas Mann. 1947. 37 p. Reprinted in *Literary Lectures.*

Of Human Bondage, With a Digression on the Art of Fiction, by W. Somerset Maugham. 1946. 16 p. Out of print.

Perspectives: Recent Literature of Russia, China, Italy, and Spain. 1961. 57 p. Reprinted in *Literary Lectures.*

Russian Soviet Literature Today, by Marc Slonim. Chinese Letters Since the Literary Revolution (1917), by Lin Yutang. The Progress of Realism in the Italian Novel, by Giose Rimanelli. The Contemporary Literature of Spain, by Arturo Torres-Rioseco.

Questions to an Artist Who is Also an Author; a Conversation Between Maurice Sendak and Virginia Haviland. 1972. 18 p. LC 1.17/A:AR 78. 55 cents.

Reprinted from the October 1971 *Quarterly Journal of the Library of Congress,* v. 28, no. 4.

Randall Jarrell, by Karl Shapiro. With a bibliography of Jarrell materials in the collections of the Library of Congress. 1967. 47 p. LC 29.9:Sh2. 70 cents.

Recent American Fiction, by Saul Bellow. 1963. 12 p. Reprinted in *Literary Lectures.*

Saint-John Perse: Praise and Presence, by Pierre Emmanuel. With a bibliography. 1971. 82 p. LC 29.9:P43. 90 cents.

The Theme of the Joseph Novels, by Thomas Mann. 1943. 23 p. Reprinted in *Literary Lectures.*

The Translation of Poetry. Address [by Allen Tate] and panel discussion presented at the International Poetry Festival held at the Library of Congress, April 13-15, 1970. 1972. 40 p. LC 29.9:T18. 60 cents.

Three Views of the Novel. 1957. 41 p. Reprinted in *Literary Lectures.*

The Biographical Novel, by Irving Stone. Remarks on the Novel, by John O'Hara. The Historical Novel, by MacKinlay Kantor.

Two Lectures: Leftovers [by] William Stafford. From Anne to Marianne [by] Josephine Jacobsen. 1973. LC 1.14: St 1. 55 cents.

Walt Whitman: Man, Poet, Philosopher. 1955, reissued 1969. 53 p. LC 29.2: W59/2. 65 cents.

The Man, by Gay Wilson Allen. The Poet, by Mark Van Doren. The Philosopher, by David Daiches.

The War and the Future, by Thomas Mann. 1944. 23 p. Reprinted in *Literary Lectures.*

Ways of Misunderstanding Poetry, by Reed Whittemore. 1965. 13 p. Reprinted in *Literary Lectures.*

Willa Cather: The Paradox of Success, by Leon Edel. 1960. 17 p. Reprinted in *Literary Lectures.*

The Writer's Experience. 1964. 32 p. Reprinted in *Literary Lectures.* Hidden Name and Complex Fate: A Writer's Experience in the United States, by Ralph Ellison. American Poet? by Karl Shapiro.

☆ U.S. GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE: 1974 O—530-022